High Country News

What it's like to build a road of ice

Get to know the whitebark pine

Power outages are a life-and-death issue

MOVING PARTS

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Industrial businesses like this scrapyard are common along MLK Boulevard in South Phoenix, which is home to one-third of the city's Black residents and 40% of its polluting sites.
Matt Williams / High Country News

Know the West.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Finding stillness in the whirl

THE STRIKING IMAGE on this month's cover commemorates the December day in 1985 when a Sikorsky Skycrane helicopter carried the final piece of an enormous steel statue to its final destination on a ridge above Butte, Montana. Conceived and built by a local electrician whose wife had recently recovered from a serious illness, Our Lady of the Rockies was dedicated to "women everywhere, especially mothers."

Since her piecemeal flight to the Continental Divide, the Lady has stood still, but, as *HCN* contributor Leah Sottile writes in this issue, the people of Butte have carried on. As the city and its stories change, the meanings of the Lady multiply.

Throughout this issue, you'll find stories about people and places in motion. Rural Alaskans are seeking to maintain a much-needed road on the frozen surface of the Kuskokwim River; Black Americans are moving to Phoenix, Arizona, in historic numbers, some driven West by worsening storms on the Atlantic Coast. Community activists are working to protect Southern California neighborhoods from advancing oil development; volunteer researchers are tracking bobcats, bears, foxes and other mammals, gathering data on their responses to climate change. Meanwhile, *HCN* Contributing Editor Jonathan Thompson draws lessons from the public-transit heyday of a century ago, when many rural Westerners could walk to a local depot and catch a train to San Francisco or New York. And the whitebark pine, known for its slow growth and epic lifespan, struggles to hang on in a habitat that's changing far too quickly.

Within this whirl of movement, you'll also encounter moments of reflection, ever more precious in our own unsettled lives. Perhaps you find those moments, as poet Vickie Vértiz writes, while "Walking to the corner store / To the arroyo to see the willows." Or perhaps, like poet Robert Wrigley, you find them in a gnarly grove of still-vital whitebark pine, where "The soul will kneel awhile, / thank you, the soul shall bask in chickadee balm."

Wherever you find your chickadee balm, we wish you an abundance of it.

Michelle Nijhuis, acting editor-in-chief

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Jonathan Thompson is a contributing editor for *High Country News*. He is the author of *Sagebrush Empire: How a Remote Utah County Became the Battlefront of American Public Lands* and other titles. @Land_Desk

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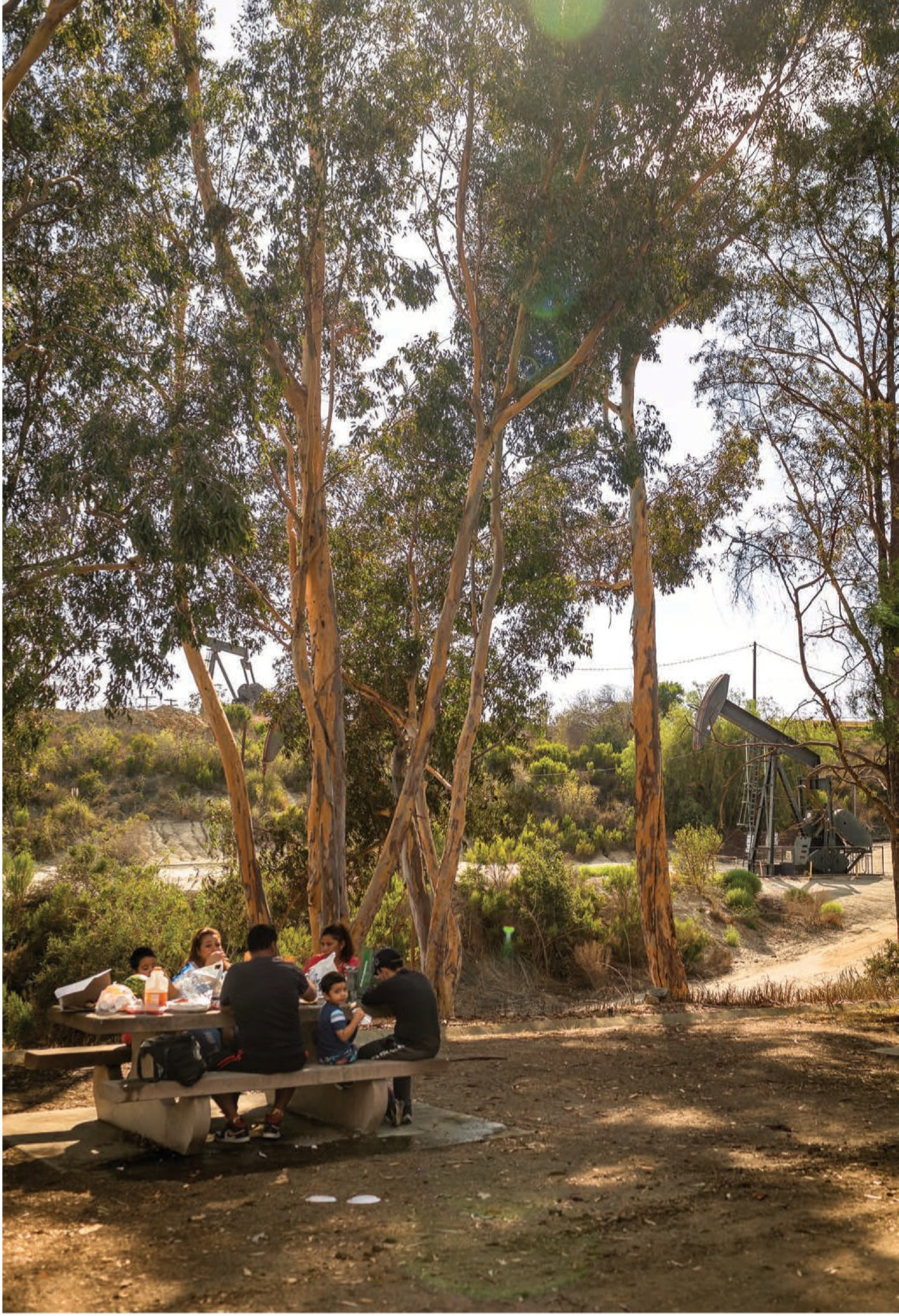
Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Sahn is on leave.

In Los Angeles, Kenneth Hahn Park's 401 acres of green space abuts the largest urban oil field in the country. Picnic benches, flowing brooks, playgrounds, soccer fields and other recreational spaces designed for both locals and tourists are situated in the shadow of dozens of working oil pumps.
Tara Pixley / High Country News



ON THE COVER

Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro
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LETTERS

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IMMERSIVE AND INFORMATIVE

Thank you for "Glen Canyon Revealed" (February 2023). Craig Childs did an outstanding job educating me about Lake Powell and the current dangers to the Colorado River ecosystem. I felt like I was right there with him, experiencing the aftereffects of what humans have done to disrupt the entire river system by building Glen Canyon Dam. The article was truly a masterpiece.

Dan Rosenthal
Salida, Colorado

Craig Childs did an excellent job balancing preserving Lake Powell versus draining it to a single reservoir in Lake Mead. I was surprised not to see any reference to Powell's water loss from evaporation and bank seepage, estimated by the Glen Canyon Institute at 860,000 acre-feet annually. Evaporative loss should be part of the equation in determining Powell's future.

Michael Powers
Phoenix, Arizona

A MEANINGFUL ESSAY

"The Glass Shelf" (February 2023) is one of my favorite recent essays. There's so much about our moms and grandmothers we never know or appreciate.

Rusty Austin
Rancho Mirage, California

"The Glass Shelf" gave me chills! Jenise Miller described my mother, her big stereo and glass shelf. Oldest of 11 children, she had very little growing up and worked hard for a better life. I never understood or thought about what glass meant to her until I read Miller's powerful thoughts. She worked outside the home and double-time at home — sewed my clothes and my doll clothes, canned pickles, jelly and applesauce. She worked *so* hard. You opened my eyes. I am grateful.

Janis Smith
Colorado

SOLAR INSPIRATION

Thank you for pointing out that public lands aren't the best places for solar power ("Save public lands: Put solar on Walmart!" February 2023).

Your headline singled out Walmart. But when it comes to solar, Walmart isn't a corporate bad guy: It has a commitment to "zero emissions across its global operations by 2040" (without relying on carbon offsets) and a program to cover its roofs and parking lots with solar panels. Target has well over 500 stores with solar panels and one with 1,800 solar carports.

Let's keep solar development close to home and protect our wild lands.

Deborah D. Stewart
Seattle, Washington

OREGON'S WILDFIRE RISK

In "Fire risk map ignites controversy" (January 2023) I was quoted making an off-handed, half-joking comment regarding Oregon's map that, taken out of context, could be taken as dismissive or disrespectful.

It was neither. Scientists and policymakers are struggling admirably to find solutions to Oregon's increasingly serious wildfire risk. Given limited time and resources, the map released in June 2022 was excellent at representing landscape-scale wildfire hazard. However, the data were not capable of providing accurate tax lot-scale analysis of susceptibility and risk, which landowners understandably thought it was meant to provide.

Oregon recognizes the problem of the misalignment of the wildfire map and public expectations and recently postponed its release indefinitely. While I wish I had used less colorful wording, I'm gratified that Oregon has come to that conclusion and will not re-release a landscape-scale wildfire map without reassessing how it can be used more effectively and with greater public support.

Peter Walker
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon

SOLUTIONS NEEDED

"The Body of the Snake" (January 2023) focused on the pros of dam removal and barely gave a nod to its impacts. Our family farmer transports 124 semi-truck loads of grain per year to the Lewiston port on the Snake, taking several hours for the 50-mile round-trip journey. Without barges, they'd have to truck crops to the Tri-Cities, a 300-mile round trip. Multiplied times many farmers, the net effect would be heavy truck traffic throughout the region, significant fossil fuel use, and an extreme hardship on family farmers.

Trains are at capacity, hauling more lucrative oil and coal to West Coast ports. Saving salmon is important, but so are viable solutions for those impacted by dam removal.

Lisa Therrell
Asotin, Washington

NEW AND IMPROVED

I subscribed to *HCN* decades ago and enjoyed it for years until it drifted into a place where most of the articles were just anti-everything and critical without taking much of a look at all sides. At that point, I let my subscription run out.

Having worked in natural resource management for over 30 years, I know firsthand these issues are complex and multifaceted, and that just slamming everything moves the ball backwards, adds to the confusion and misinformation and further divides us.

Fast forward to 2022, when my son gave me a subscription for Christmas. Wow! What a difference. The writing and depth of the articles are a huge improvement, and they read more objectively. I've received two issues so far, read them cover to cover, enjoyed every minute and learned a lot. As they say: "This isn't your father's *HCN*." It's a lot better. Thanks for the great reporting.

Andy Kulla
Florence, Montana

CORRECTIONS

In "The Body of The Snake" (January 2023), a caption should have described the water as below Lower Granite Dam. Another caption misidentified a wild steelhead as a chinook salmon. Most residential solar *panels,* not residential solar *systems,* are about 400 watts ("Save Public Lands: Put Solar on Walmart!" February 2023). (Full systems average 4,000 to 7,000 watts each, or .004 to .007 megawatts.) Reader and donor Dawn Suzanne's quote incorrectly labeled her location, which is Meskwaki Nation in Tama County, Iowa. We regret the errors.

REPORTAGE

A wave of green colonialism

How a hydropower storage facility on Yakama lands is perpetuating Manifest Destiny.

BY B. 'TOASTIE' OASTER

"IS IT GREEN ENERGY if it's impacting cultural traditional sites?"

Yakama Nation Tribal Councilman Jeremy Takala sounded weary. For five years, tribal leaders and staff have been fighting a renewable energy development that could permanently destroy tribal cultural property. "This area, it's irreplaceable."

The privately owned land, outside Goldendale, Washington, is called Pushpum, or "mother of roots," a first foods seed bank. The Yakama people have treaty-protected gathering rights there. One wind turbine-studded ridge, Juniper Point, is the proposed site of a pumped hydro storage facility. But to build it, Boston-based Rye Development would have to carve up Pushpum — and the Yakama Nation lacks a realistic way to stop it.

Back in October 2008, unbeknownst to Takala, Scott Tillman, CEO of Golden Northwest Aluminum Corporation, met with the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, a collection of governor-appointed representatives from Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana who maintain a 20-year regional energy plan prioritizing low economic and environmental tolls. Tillman, who owned a shuttered Lockheed Martin aluminum smelter near Goldendale, told the council about the contaminated site's redevelopment potential, specifically for pumped hydro storage, which requires a steep incline like Juniper Point to move water through a turbine. Shortly thereafter, Klickitat County's public utility department tried to implement Tillman's plan, but hit a snag in the federal regulatory process. That's when Rye Development stepped in.

"We're committed to at least a $10 million portion of the cleanup of the former aluminum smelter," said Erik Steimle, Rye's vice president of project development, "an area that is essentially sitting there now that wouldn't be cleaned up in that capacity without this project."

Meanwhile, Tillman cleaned up and sold another smelting site, just across the Columbia River in The Dalles, Oregon, a Superfund site where Lockheed Martin had poisoned the groundwater with cyanide. He sold it to Google's parent company, Alphabet, which operates water-guzzling data centers in The Dalles and plans to build more. For nine years, the county and Rye plotted the fate of Pushpum — without ever notifying the Yakama Nation.

The tribal government only learned of the development in December 2017, when the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) issued a public notice of acceptance for Rye's preliminary permit application. Tribal officials had just 60 days to catch up on nine years of development planning and issue their initial concerns and objections as public comments.

When it came time for government-to-government consultation in August 2021, FERC designated Rye as its representative. But the Yakama Nation refused to consult with the corporation. "The tribe's treaty was between the U.S. government and the tribe. We're two sovereigns," said Elaine Harvey, environmental coordinator at Yakama Nation Fisheries, who's been heavily involved with the project. "We're supposed to deal with the state."

FERC countered that using corporate stand-ins for tribal consultation is standard practice for the commission. When the tribe objected, FERC said it could file more public comments to the docket instead of consulting.

But sensitive cultural information was involved, which, by Yakama tribal law, cannot be made public. Takala noted, for example, that Yakama people don't want non-Natives harvesting and marketing first foods the

Elaine Harvey, environmental coordinator at Yakama Nation Fisheries, holds a root-digging tool called a *ka'pin* at a wind farm upriver from Juniper Point, on Yakama Nation ceded lands. **Leah Nash** way commercial pickers market huckleberries: “That has an impact for our people as well, trying to save up for the winter.” The tribe needs confidentiality to protect its cultural resources.

There’s just one catch: Rule 2201. According to FERC, Rule 2201 legally prohibits the agency from engaging in off-the-record communications in a contested proceeding. Records of all consultations must be made available to the public and other stakeholders, including prospective developers and county officials. Who wrote Rule 2201? FERC did.

“Nevertheless,” FERC wrote to the Yakama Nation in December 2021, “the Commission endeavors, to the extent authorized by law, to reduce procedural impediments to working directly and effectively with tribal governments.” FERC said the nation could either relay any sensitive information in a confidential file — though that information “must be shared with at least some participants in the proceeding” — or else keep it confidential by simply not sharing it at all, in which case FERC would proceed without taking it into account. So formal federal consultation still hasn’t happened. But FERC is moving forward anyway.

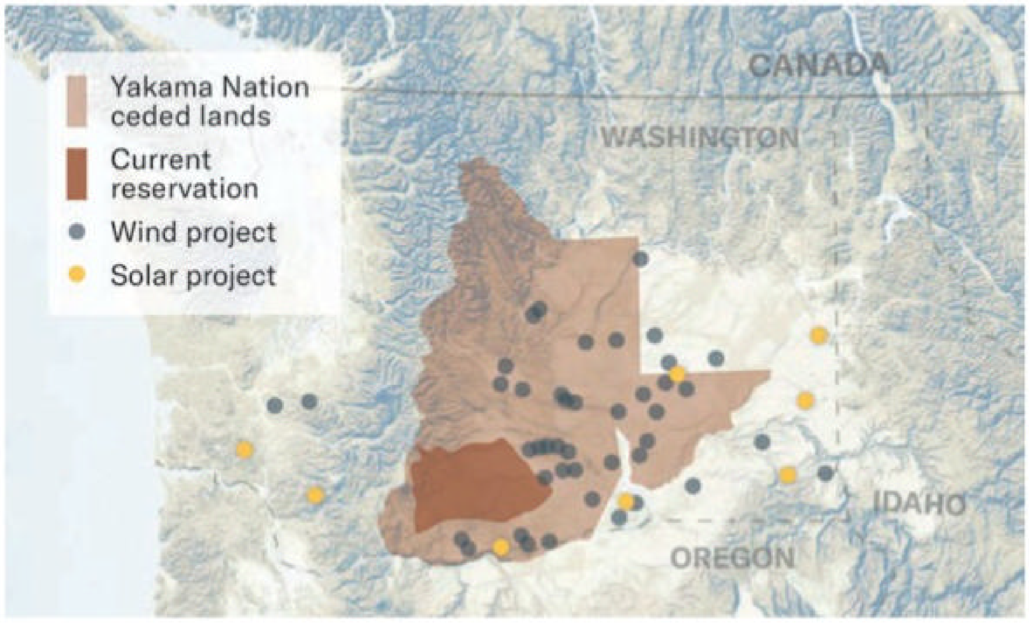
“IT’S IMPORTANT FOR FIRST NATIONS to be heard in this process,” said Steimle, the developer. During a two-hour tour of the site, he championed the project’s technical merits and its role in meeting state carbon goals. “If you look at Europe at this point, it’s probably 20 years ahead of us integrating large amounts of renewables.”

Steimle repeatedly described Rye as weighed down by stringent consultation and licensing processes. Rye, he said, lacks real authority: “We don’t have the power in the situation to ultimately decide, you know, it’s going to be this technology, or it’s going to be in this final location.” Becky Brun, Rye’s communications director, echoed Steimle’s tone of inevitability: “Regardless of what happens here with this pumped storage project, this land will most certainly get redeveloped into something.”

When asked what Rye could offer the Yakama people as compensation for the irreversible destruction of their cultural property, Steimle suggested “employment associated with the project.”

Takala wasn’t surprised. “That’s always the first thing offered on many of these projects. It’s all about money.”

At least 60% of the proposed wind and solar projects in Washington are on the Yakama Nation’s ceded lands. **Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**



Presented with the reality that Yakama people might not want Rye’s jobs, Steimle hesitated. “Yeah, I mean I, I can’t argue that — maybe it won’t be meaningful to them.”

But for Klickitat County, the jobs pitch works: It’s a chance to revive employment lost when the smelter closed. “That was one of the largest employers in Klickitat County — very good family-wage jobs for over a generation,” said Dave Sauter, a longtime county commissioner who finished his final term at the end of 2022. The smelter’s closing was “a huge blow,” he said. “Redevelopment of that site would be really beneficial.”

Sauter acknowledged the pumped hydro storage facility would only provide about a third of the jobs that the smelter offered in its final days, but “it will lead to other energy development in Klickitat County.” The county, with its armada of aging wind turbines and proximity to the hydroelectric grid, prides itself on being one of the greenest energy producers in the state and has asked FERC for an expedited timeline.

Klickitat County’s eagerness creates another barrier to the Yakama Nation. In Washington, a developer can take one of two permitting paths: through the state’s Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council, or through county channels. Both lead to FERC. In this case, working with the county benefits Rye: Klickitat, a majority Republican county, has a contentious relationship with the Yakama Nation, one that even Sauter described as “challenging.”

“Klickitat County refuses to work with us,” said Takala. On Sept. 19, 2022, Harvey logged into a Zoom meeting with the Klickitat County Planning Department to deliver comments as a private citizen. Harvey says county officials, who know her from her work with the Yakama Nation, locked her out of the Zoom room, even though the meeting was open to the public and a friend of hers confirmed that the call was working and the meeting underway. Undeterred, Harvey attended in person and delivered her comments.

The Planning Department denied that Harvey was deliberately locked out, claiming that everyone who arrived on Zoom was admitted. They also said they were having technical difficulties.

FIGHTING RYE’S PROPOSAL has required the efforts of tribal attorneys, archaeologists and government staffers from a number of departments. “Finding the staff to do site location is very difficult when we don’t have the funds put forth,” Takala said.

And Rye’s project is just one of dozens proposed within the Yakama Nation’s 10 million-acre treaty territory. Maps from the tribe and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife show that of the 51 wind and solar projects currently proposed statewide — not including geothermal or pumped hydro storage projects, which are also renewable energy developments — at least 34 are on or partially on the Yakama Nation’s ceded lands. Each of these proposals has its own constellation of developers, permitting agencies, government officials and landowners.

“There’s so many projects being proposed in the area that we here at the nation are feeling the pressure,” said Takala. He noted that when it comes to fulfilling obligations to tribes, the United States drags its feet. “But when it’s a developer, things get pushed through really quickly. It’s pretty much a repeating history all over again.”

REPORTAGE

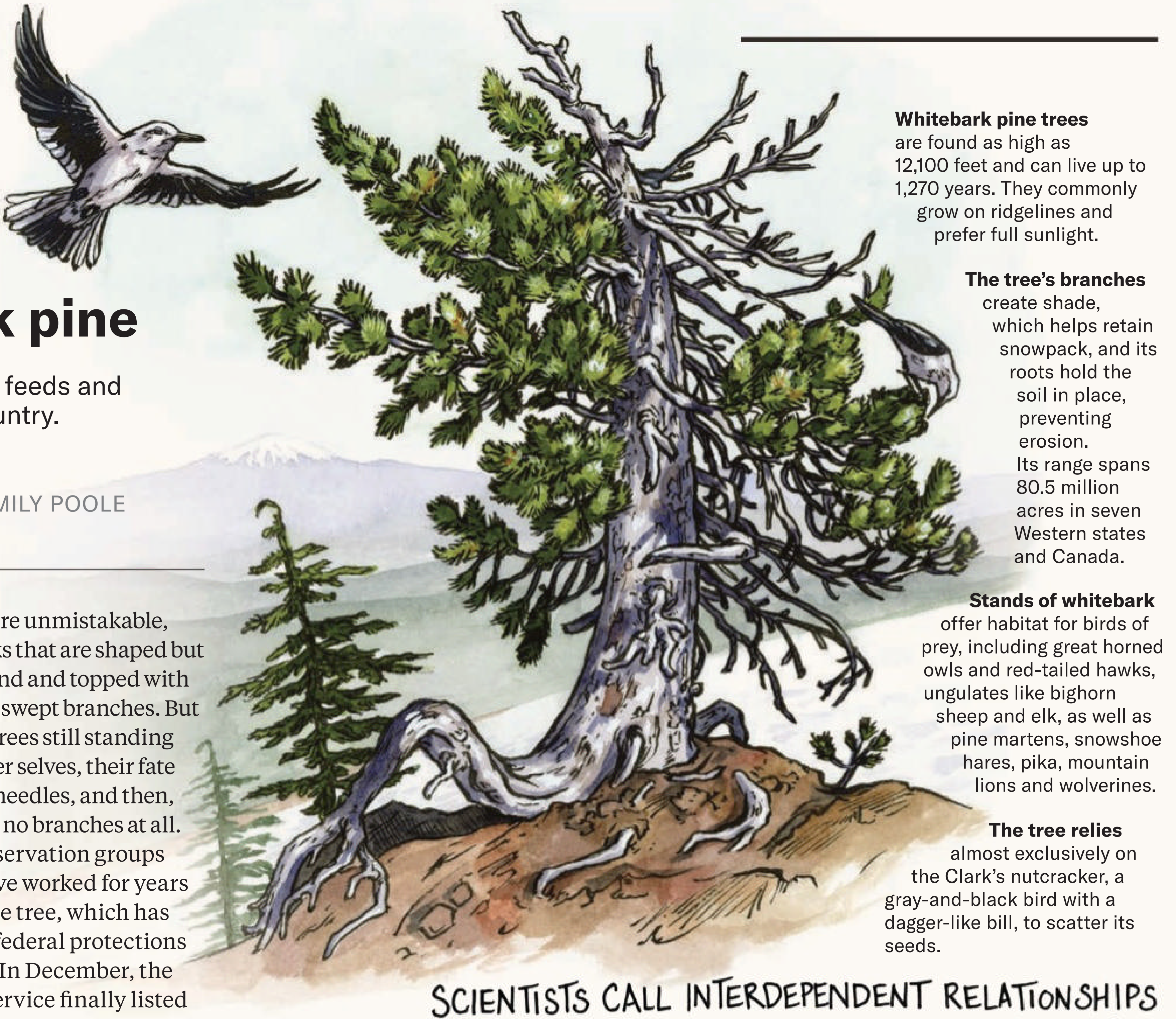
Get to know the whitebark pine

This threatened tree feeds and shelters the high country.

BY KYLIE MOHR
ILLUSTRATIONS BY EMILY POOLE

WHITEBARK PINES are unmistakable, with stout, twisted trunks that are shaped but not dominated by the wind and topped with bundles of needles on upswept branches. But by 2016, over half of the trees still standing were husks of their former selves, their fate signaled by flaming red needles, and then, ghostly gray trunks with no branches at all.

Tribal nations, conservation groups and federal agencies have worked for years to protect and restore the tree, which has been on the waitlist for federal protections for more than a decade. In December, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finally listed the tree as threatened.



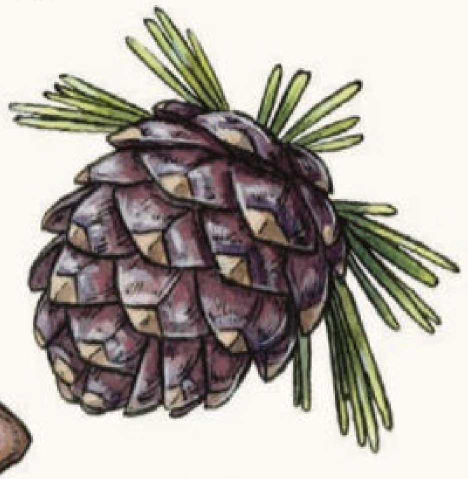
Whitebark pine trees are found as high as 12,100 feet and can live up to 1,270 years. They commonly grow on ridgelines and prefer full sunlight.

The tree's branches create shade, which helps retain snowpack, and its roots hold the soil in place, preventing erosion. Its range spans 80.5 million acres in seven Western states and Canada.

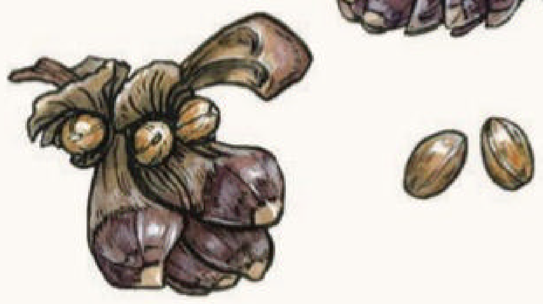
Stands of whitebark offer habitat for birds of prey, including great horned owls and red-tailed hawks, ungulates like bighorn sheep and elk, as well as pine martens, snowshoe hares, pika, mountain lions and wolverines.

The tree relies almost exclusively on the Clark's nutcracker, a gray-and-black bird with a dagger-like bill, to scatter its seeds.

SCIENTISTS CALL INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN NATURE LIKE THIS "COEVOLVED MUTUALISM."



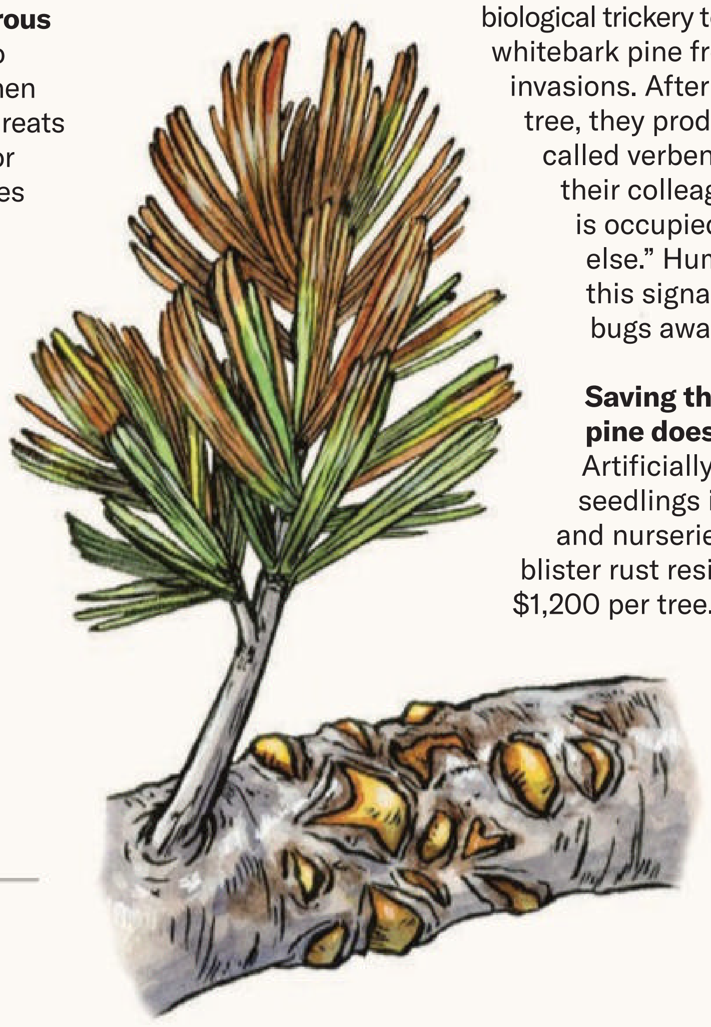
Whitebark pinecone seeds contain more calories per gram than chocolate.



The seeds can be cooked in hot ashes, roasted, mixed with serviceberries or ground into a mush or flour. Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy have used the tree's early spring needles and sap for cough syrup and eaten the inner bark when other food sources were scarce.

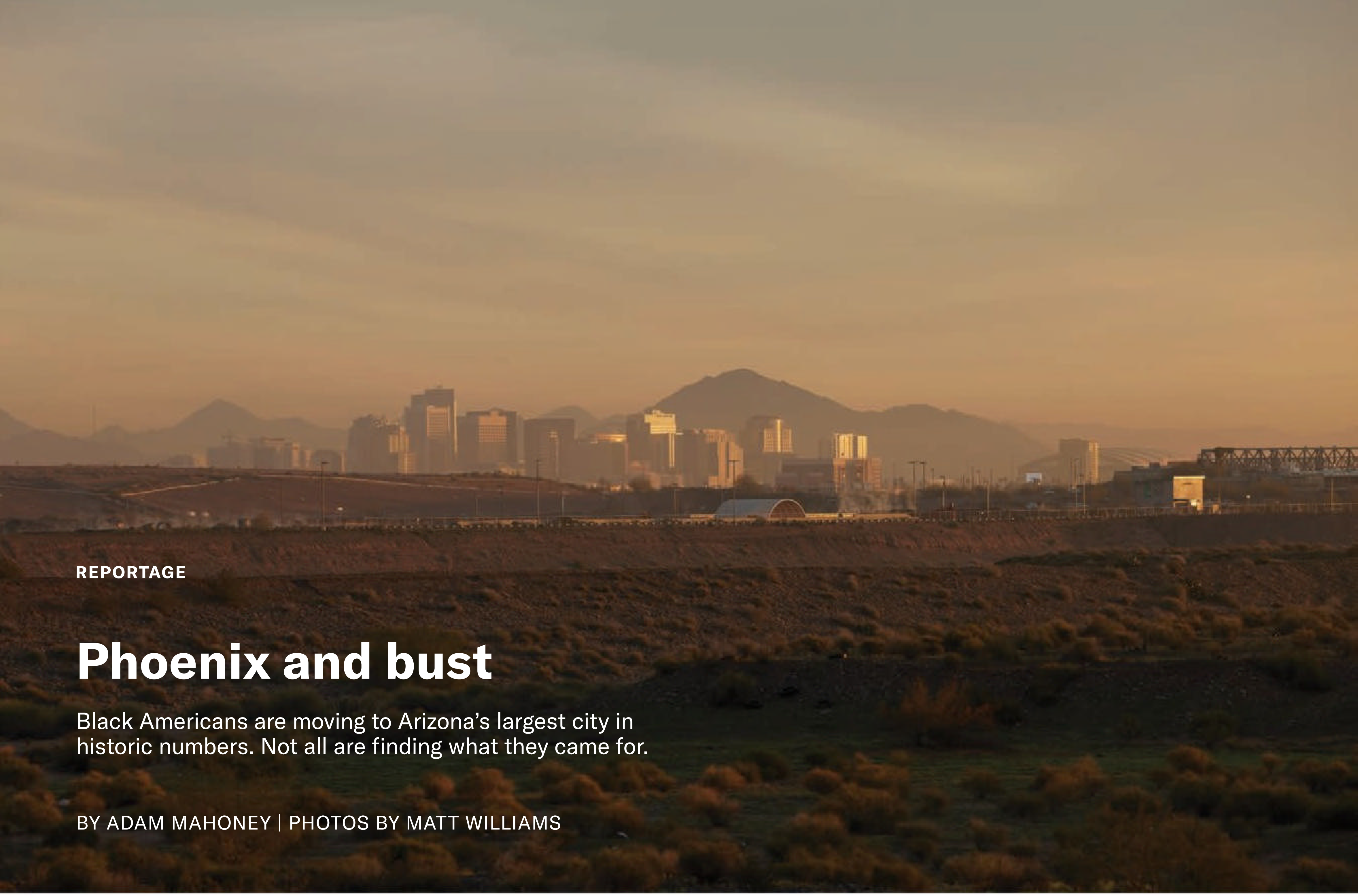
Whitebark pines face numerous threats, from invasive fungi to climate change to beetles. When combined, these ecological threats can exacerbate each other: For example, drought-stricken trees have a harder time fighting off beetle invasions.

Dead red branches and orange-rimmed canker sores are signs of the conifers' number-one threat: white pine blister rust, an invasive fungal disease that can kill the tree. One way to create tougher forests: Identify trees that seem resistant, collect and cultivate their offspring in nurseries and then replant them in the wild.



Scientists and land managers use biological trickery to protect the whitebark pine from beetle invasions. After beetles attack a tree, they produce a pheromone called verbenone that warns their colleagues, "This tree is occupied. Go somewhere else." Humans can mimic this signal to keep the bugs away altogether.

Saving the whitebark pine doesn't come cheap. Artificially inoculating seedlings in greenhouses and nurseries to test for blister rust resilience can cost $1,200 per tree. ✺



REPORTAGE

Phoenix and bust

Black Americans are moving to Arizona's largest city in historic numbers. Not all are finding what they came for.

BY ADAM MAHONEY | PHOTOS BY MATT WILLIAMS

IN LATE OCTOBER 2012, the 80 mph winds of Hurricane Sandy pelted the tiny suburb of Pennington, New Jersey, where Brian Watson worked. Watson's job as a fraud analyst for Bank of America Merrill Lynch required him to be on call 24/7 despite the severe weather. And so he worked — even as utility poles buckled under the storm and transformers exploded in its ferocity.

Parts of Mercer County lost power for an entire week. The disaster caused an estimated $70 billion in damage and prompted Watson's company to look for a place that was safe from severe coastal weather. "The company discovered that they didn't have an adequate response to the power going out or natural disasters in general," Watson told me. Executives at the company chose Phoenix, far from the coast — and chose Watson, who led the New Jersey office during the storm, to establish an additional hub in the sunny Arizona city.

Watson, 37 at the time, moved to the Phoenix area in January 2014. He was apprehensive about the heat — he'd read about the city's increasingly hot and deadly summers — and about moving to a city where he'd be one of a relatively small number of Black residents. But his anxiety was tempered by the fact that Collette Blakeney, whom he'd just started dating, would join him and that they'd navigate their new city together. "As long as I have her," he told me, "I'm good."

When Blakeney — "Coco" to her friends and family — first arrived, she felt daunted. The city was hot and sprawling. After living in New York City, she was used to urban bustle, but Phoenix, one of the nation's five largest cities, felt different. It lacked community spaces and the public transportation she was used to. "I felt stuck in a place where leaders didn't prioritize making it livable for people who aren't rich," the 38-year-old from South Carolina said.

Watson and Blakeney settled in an apartment in Chandler, a suburb of Phoenix, and married in August 2015. After a few years, they bought a home in an affordable, yet rapidly changing neighborhood in South Phoenix. The home is newer and more spacious than the places they'd lived in on the East Coast. Plus, the neighborhood was diverse, and many residents looked like them.

The Watsons are among the at least 70,000 Black folks who moved into Maricopa County between 2010 and 2020. More than 650,000 people have relocated to the Phoenix area during that time, making Maricopa the country's fastest-growing county. A disproportionate amount of that growth is driven by new Black residents: Between January 2020 and December 2021, the Black population's increase outpaced every other major racial group. Maricopa County's Black population is growing nearly seven times faster than its white population, making it

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This story was produced in partnership with Capital B News.

the fastest-growing region for Black people outside the Dallas and Houston areas, according to U.S. Census Bureau data from 2010 and 2021.

Those moving to Phoenix are a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Black Americans who have left the coasts and the Midwest in search of better jobs and safer communities. This isn't the first time that such a significant number have been on the move: Between the early 1900s to the mid-1970s, roughly 6 million Black people left the South and spread across the country in what historians call "The Great Migration." In recent years, Black America is in the midst of another great migration — one in which many are reversing the previous trend and returning to the South, drawn by the lower cost of living and a larger Black community. But historic numbers are also moving to the West: Las Vegas and Phoenix have the fastest-growing Black populations outside of the Gulf Coast region.

But Black residents in Phoenix face a distinctive set of challenges that impact their ability to build welcoming neighborhoods for their communities. Their experience has been made more difficult by policies that, for more than a century, have encouraged inequities in community investment, favoring predominantly white neighborhoods. And, unlike the previous Great Migration, this trend is rising against the existential threat of climate change. Black Americans are moving for a variety of reasons, but rising temperatures, drought and erratic weather are already making their new homes less livable. It's a reality that both new and longtime Black residents believe they have two ways to address: Either they move again, or else they hunker down and build thriving and climate-resilient neighborhoods, despite all the barriers.

IN AUGUST 2022, I visited Phoenix over a five-day period of triple-degree heat. In addition to its precipitous population growth, it's also getting hotter: Phoenix is the fourth fastest-warming city in the country, averaging more than 110 annual days with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees, about a 14-day increase since 1970. By 2060, scientists project the city will experience more than 132 days over that threshold. The scorching afternoons I spent there were punctuated by a cacophony of alerts warning of extreme dust events — known as haboobs — and poor air quality fueled by fire, dust and industrial pollution.

Earlier that year, I had come across the work of Phoenix-based poet Rashaad Thomas, who initially moved to Arizona when he joined the military. After his stint

Downtown Phoenix, Arizona *(opposite)*.

Collette and Brian Watson photographed at South Mountain Park in South Phoenix in January.

with the Air Force, though, he struggled with homelessness, moving from one city to another, never staying anywhere for long. He got on his feet and then met Nancy Portillo, whom he married in 2014. They lived in Scottsdale, a suburb north of Phoenix that is 80% white and just 2% Black.

In one of our many conversations, Thomas told me that he had been profiled by police and experienced racism during routine interactions with his neighbors in Scottsdale. According to 2020 data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, nearly 60% of racially motivated hate crimes in Arizona target Black people. Even when he found a home and hard-won stability, the comfort and belonging of community eluded him. Thomas processed this tension through the written word. He began sharing poems and short stories online about living in Arizona as a Black man. His words struck a nerve, making the connection between structural racism, environmental violence and Black life in the desert, and in 2019 he was named the best Phoenix-based poet by *Phoenix New Times*, a local newspaper. Over the past few years, he's published an episodic long-form poem titled "Phoenix Don't Love Them." In a recent installment, he wrote: "Front yard / nappy weeds. For sale sign, barrettes. Gentrification and environmental racism are horrible hair stylists and colorists."

Rashaad Thomas at Manzanita Park in January.

In 2015, the Thomases learned they were pregnant. Not wanting to start a family in a place they felt unwanted, they left Scottsdale and moved to South Phoenix, the city's historically Black neighborhood — where Brian and Collette Watson also ended up. "I wanted my children to feel safe," Thomas told me, "where they could walk out and know they're not going to be attacked just because they're Black."

Moving to a Black neighborhood helped alleviate some of their fears, but it also created new ones. Like many of the country's predominantly minority towns and cities, residents here have struggled owing to decades of disinvestment. And as the state's population has grown, so has its air pollution. Phoenix's air quality is now ranked fifth-worst in the country for ozone pollution and in the top 10 for particle pollution. In recent years, the city's longtime industrial pollution has been made even worse by wildfires: 2020 saw more than 2,000 blazes in the state.

The environmental, social and economic inequities have taken a toll. Overall, the average life expectancy has plummeted. While every state in the country saw a big drop in life expectancy following the spread of COVID-19, Arizona's drop was the nation's fifth-steepest. In 2020, Black Phoenix residents under 65 died at a rate that was 1.5 times higher per capita than white residents and two times higher than Latino residents, according to a *Capital B News*

Industrial businesses, like this scrapyard, are a common sight along MLK Boulevard in South Phoenix.

and *High Country News* analysis of Arizona Department of Health Services mortality data.

"I moved here to feel safer, to be surrounded by Black people," Thomas said. He felt that his family faced a choice between police brutality in Scottsdale and air pollution in South Phoenix.

Shortly after they moved to the industrialized area, Thomas' wife, Nancy, experienced a miscarriage. While it's impossible to attribute any single case to environmental causes, the couple's home is just a few miles from a Superfund site, active landfills, major polluting highways, and major industrial plants. Studies show that pregnant people are more than 10% more likely to lose pregnancies when exposed to high pollution levels. After the miscarriage, Rashaad Thomas published an editorial in the *Arizona Mirror*. He argued that Phoenix was responsible for "negligent homicide" for "willfully ignoring the impact of environmental racism" and its health impacts. His editorial was referenced by numerous journalists but Thomas said it was never acknowledged by city officials.

In July, Thomas summed up the bind to me in a question: "When a community is forced to live on hazardous land, what do you expect?"

ON A SATURDAY morning last August, 50 Black South Phoenix residents gathered at the South Mountain Community Center for an event organized by a local nonprofit. As a small group of children played in the center's daycare, the adults huddled over grits, eggs and sausage. The center was a refuge from the 106-degree heat, but that day it was even more: The aroma of sausage and syrup hung in the air, mingling with the black, red and green banners that decorated the space to celebrate Black August, an annual celebration of activism by Black political prisoners.

The event was arranged by Mass Liberation Arizona, an advocacy group focused on decarceration and divestment from the U.S. criminal justice system. In recent years, the group has brought people together to fight the inequities facing the residents of South Phoenix. It sees the issues as connected — the high rates of incarceration in South Phoenix are entwined with the staggering poverty and pollution, the rising heat, and the lack of tree canopy to shade the area's majority Black population. And it believes the residents who are most impacted are the ones best able to forge a path forward: "The people closest to the problem are the people closest to the solution," the group's website reads. Increasingly, Mass Liberation has been organizing to build an equitable and sustainable home for South Phoenix's Black residents, both the legacy community members and the relative newcomers.

People at the event called for criminal-record expungement, community-

A new housing development next to legacy homes in South Phoenix.

owned grocery stores, housing protections for renters and homeowners, and increased funding for environmental cleanups. At one table — backdropped by a poster that read, "Where are all the Black people?" — unregistered voters were helped through the registration process as other locals signed up to volunteer to take action against the city's notoriously underfunded and increasingly privatized school district. Others signed a pledge to join an upcoming movement against displacement and housing violence.

Decades of redlining and racist housing policies have deepened the inequities that Mass Liberation is fighting. Until the 1960s, city policies banned Black residents from living or visiting parts of Phoenix north of Van Buren Street, located just south of downtown. Lack of investment in South Phoenix meant that its homes were less sought after and less expensive, and as a result many Black residents moved there.

"No matter where we are, Black people will always be forced to live in the worst parts of the city," said Rashad Shabazz, a professor at the School of Social Transformation at Arizona State University.

But today, the lack of investment no longer translates to a low cost of living. From 2016 to 2019, Phoenix jumped from being the 91st most expensive city in the U.S. to the 40th, and as of 2022, it has become one of the top 10 most expensive cities for first-time homeowners. Shabazz said the city has become a "stopping point," a place where Black residents come to flee economic, social and environmental instability, only to find they still cannot put down roots for the same reasons they left.

This phenomenon also complicates Black residents' ability to protect themselves from climate change: The precarious nature of daily life makes it challenging for neighborhoods to build the collective response networks that are necessary during times of crisis. This makes Black Americans more vulnerable to natural disasters as they move between climate-impacted communities.

"Black people are living in a valley where it is getting hotter and toxins have been settling for decades, but the problem isn't only the air quality," Shabazz said. "The problem is that the place was never developed for any kind of livability or stability for its Black and brown residents."

Building a better future, members of the Mass Liberation collective concluded, requires a Phoenix that values its people as much as its real estate prices. "It's difficult because property values are doing extremely well, but I've noticed that Arizona's not consistent with what they do versus say," said Afiah Antwi Walsh, a South Phoenix resident who attended the August community event. Walsh moved to the area in the late 2011, initially drawn by its historic community. Now she is concerned about maintaining it. "Whether here, in Harlem or Detroit, we need to protect our Black communities in the face of all the things meant to plague us."

AS THE YEARS ticked by and Brian and Collette Watson settled down in South Phoenix, their lives became interwoven with the local Black activist community. Groups like Mass Liberation, the Arizona Coalition for Change and the local chapters of the Urban League and NAACP — vibrant organizations with memberships in the hundreds — work to address the inequities that Phoenix's Black residents experience. In 2016, the Watsons, both artists, founded Black River Life Media, a production company that publishes films meant to lift the voices in their community. They produce content for local organizations and some of their work has appeared in film festivals.

"Living in this type of environment really deepened my understanding of how structural oppression shapes our lives," Collette Watson said. "The forces that shorten our lives as Black people still take the people that you love away, even if you have a few more coins in your pocket. To create the healing environments we deserve, it's not something any of us can do by ourselves."

Still, the patterns created by historical segregation may worsen in the coming decades as the extreme heat and pollution worsen. On average, 80% of homes in Phoenix are at risk for extreme heat, but in North Phoenix, where the city's white population is concentrated, the share is 58%. In South Phoenix, it is 99%.

"Our lives are determined by a harsh environment — environmentally *and* politically," Collette Watson told me last summer.

The challenges continue to rebuff a generation of Black Americans searching for economic, social and environmental stability. "Black people should not feel forced to stay in a place that does not serve them," she told me. "Black people have been trying to build something beautiful here, but developers are the ones calling the shots."

She still dreams of a Phoenix where she and her neighbors have access to health care and fresh food and don't face displacement. But she is worried about the future. "It pains me to say it, but we are actively considering long term being somewhere else," she said. "We worry about the heat, and we worry about water." ✳

> *“Black people have been trying to build something beautiful here, but developers are the ones calling the shots.”*

A group playing soccer at Manzanita Park in South Phoenix, where industry and pollution line the horizon *(above)*.

Collette Watson, with downtown Phoenix in the distance *(right)*.

REPORTAGE

What it's like to build a road of ice

The Kuskokwim River ice road in Alaska is a lifeline for communities outside the highway system.

BY VICTORIA PETERSEN
PHOTOS BY KATIE BASILE

A FEW WEEKS AGO, Mark Leary and his crew began to plow the snow off the frozen Kuskokwim River in southwest Alaska. Every year, after the river freezes and the snow is cleared from the ice, dozens of trucks, snowmobiles and other vehicles from up to 17 different villages whiz back and forth atop it. This is the Kuskokwim ice road, whose main stem can extend over 300 miles and which connects the bulk of the region's population.

"Oh my gosh, you gotta see it with your own eyes," said Leary, the director of development and operations for the road and an employee of the Native Village of Napaimute, the entity that leads the effort to establish and maintain it. "The traffic on it is huge. There's a steady stream of vehicles all day long going up and down on the ice road."

Residents have used the frozen Kuskokwim River as a road for motor vehicles since people first brought them to the region decades ago. But Leary said the tribe saw a need to begin regularly maintaining it about 10 years ago to facilitate transportation of wood products during the winter, and to keep the route clear for the thousands of residents who live along the river. Now, however, a changing climate and more erratic winter storms are making ice roads less reliable and harder to keep safe and passable all winter long.

Frozen rivers provide a relatively smooth and solid corridor for traveling in the North. They have been used for foot, ski and sled transport for thousands of years and still connect rural communities across the state. Today, most residents and businesses along the Kuskokwim use the ice road to carry mail and freight, get to the hospital or clinic, and even transport school basketball teams to games in nearby villages. There is no other road connecting the communities; without it, people would have to rely on air travel, which isn't always an option because of bad weather or exorbitant costs.

"This is a real road," Leary said. "It is real, and it's a necessity, not a novelty."

Ice roads are also important for industry in the Arctic, especially on Alaska's North Slope, where resource companies use them so operators can avoid driving on tundra when traveling between base camps and exploration and development sites. "The ice roads you see on TV, they have an industry behind them — oil companies and mining companies," Leary said. "This road that we plow on the Kuskokwim River is for the people who live here. For the few months that it exists, it makes life much more convenient and much, much cheaper."

Adrian Boelens, who has lived in the Yup'ik village of Aniak her whole life, said she uses the ice road a lot. "I remember a time when my little brother-in-law broke a tooth," Boelens said. "We have a clinic (in Aniak), but their medical services are limited. Bethel" — a major hub in the region — "has the next biggest hospital, and that's easiest to access. He had to go down with a truck to get his tooth repaired so he didn't lose the tooth."

Boelens and her family also use the ice road to go ice fishing, visit friends, travel to nearby villages for basketball tournaments, and drive to Bethel to buy appliances, recreational gear and raw materials, like lumber. "Getting that stuff flown in with air carriers is expensive," she said. "Utilizing the ice road for that is a huge benefit. We had a water pump go out once, but we drove down to Bethel with our truck to pick up a water pump because it was just cheaper and easier."

LEARY AND THE 10 or so people on his crew maintain the ice road with three graders and three plow trucks. The annual cost depends on inflation, weather and how many miles the crew can plow. In past years, the Kuskokwim River ice road has cost more than $300,000 to maintain, Leary said. This year it could be twice that, he added, since fuel has surged to about $7 a gallon, and the markers used to guide drivers have doubled in price, from $16 two years ago to $32 this year.

For most of the last decade, maintenance costs have been covered by donations from residents, businesses, city governments, tribal governments, Alaska Native village corporations and the Alaska Native regional corporation in the area. "We reached out to everybody along the river to help pay for it,

A truck heads upriver from the town of Bethel, Alaska, on the Kuskokwim River ice road (*opposite*). Ozzie Demientieff and his granddaughter head downriver from Bethel (*top*). John Paul pulls whitefish from a set net alongside the Kuskokwim River ice road near Napaskiak, Alaska (*above*).

"For the few months that it exists, it makes life much more convenient and much, much cheaper."

Edward Berlin heads home to the village of Kwethluk after fixing his snowmachine with help from family members in Napakiak (*below and bottom*).

and the support was huge," Leary said. "One time, it almost made us cry." The crew was plowing back to Kasigluk from Bethel, a few dozen miles away. "The people of Kasigluk literally passed the hat, pitching in $5, $10, $20 each — whatever they could afford. When we got out there in the middle of the night, they came down to the river with an envelope in their hand. Their contribution was like $300-something. It paid for one guy's wages."

In recent years, Leary and his crew have advocated for more state support. Every state entity in the area uses the ice road, including the Alaska State Troopers. Each time Leary saw a trooper on the ice road, he took a picture and emailed it to state officials. After that, Leary said, the state contributed 4,000 uniform trail markers to designate the boundaries of the road, fulfilling the crew's "longtime dream," Leary said. Before, they marked the edges with whatever they had, including tree branches. Now, people can easily tell when they're on the official ice road.

Last year, the Alaska Legislature began giving the crew a grant to help cover the costs of maintaining the ice road. This year, the crew is also, for the first time, receiving federal money: Lawmakers included ice road maintenance funds, distributed through a state program called Safe Ice Roads for Alaska, in a 2021 trillion-dollar federal infrastructure bill. The program allows entities to apply for up to $500,000. As a result, Leary's crew is operating on full public funding this year.

But money isn't Leary's only worry. Unprecedented weather and warming from climate change are shortening the ice road's season and hampering its reliability; warm winter storms can thaw rivers in places, making ice roads hazardous or impassable. According to the Alaska Department of Resources, Division of Lands, the winter tundra travel season on the North Slope has shrunk from about 200 days in the 1970s to about 120 days in the early 2000s.

"What I've observed is we have lost our pattern," Leary said. "There's no reliable seasonal pattern." It used to be that the river would be frozen by mid-October; not anymore. "There's just nothing that we can count on. We don't know from year to year. We just don't know. We watch and observe, and deal with it." ✺

REPORTAGE

Can camera traps relieve our species' loneliness?

A community science project reintroduces humans to their fellow mammals.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BEN GOLDFARB

THE COYOTE AMBLED into the clearing on the first of September, a warm night lit by a thumbnail of moon. She'd spent the evening padding through juniper and pines near Colorado's Arkansas River: snuffling after rabbits, pouncing on mice, inspecting fox scat. At precisely 10:48 p.m., she passed the Reconyx PC800 camera that I'd strapped to a ponderosa, which snapped three portraits of her lit by infrared flash — head high, eyes aglow, the embodiment of her confident, curious species.

I learned about the coyote over a month later, when I retrieved the Reconyx and downloaded its photos. It was among eight cameras I'd set for Snapshot USA, a nationwide census of mammals with around 150 participants, most affiliated with universities or nonprofits. For two months, we canvassed forests, wetlands, deserts, prairies, urban parks — anywhere a deer might set hoof or a squirrel lay paw. Brigit Rooney, the survey's coordinator, told me that its purpose was to "track wildlife population responses to changes in land use, cover and climate across spatial and temporal scales" — in other words, to figure out where mammals live, where they're going, and what drives them.

I'd joined Snapshot for several reasons. I wanted to contribute to science, certainly. But I also longed for the frisson of gazing into the eyes of my fellow beings, and hoped to gain insight into the hidden Others with whom we share the land. Rooney, who annually sets cameras on her family's property near Whitefish, Montana, once checked her memory card and saw a photo of herself strolling the grounds — followed, eight minutes later, by a mountain lion. "You realize that, at any moment, there could be an animal watching you," Rooney said. "And there probably is."

More than anything, I wanted to watch back.

THE FIRST PERSON to deploy camera traps for science was likely Frank Chapman, a biologist who spent the 1920s and 1930s studying the ecology of Barro Colorado, a Panamanian island. Most of his contemporaries collected animals with rifles, but Chapman rejected lethality: "We want a census of the living, not a record of the dead." So he strung a trip-wire between trees, baited it with a banana, and rigged it to a tripod-mounted camera, using explosive magnesium powder to furnish the flash. His rudimentary apparatus captured crystalline images of ocelots, cougars, tapirs, agoutis, coatis and

Previous page, from top: Coyote, elk, beaver. This page: A raccoon fishing, moose legs and a fox.

WEB EXTRA See Ben's trail cam videos at **hcn.org/fellow-mammals**

peccaries. "The pleasures of life on Barro Colorado," Chapman wrote in *National Geographic* in 1927, "were materially increased by the knowledge that I had such distinguished neighbors."

Although the camera-trap revolution took decades to flower, by the mid-2000s the devices — now cheap, reliable and digital — were one of wildlife biology's most essential tools. Camera traps proved that cougars inhabit the Santa Monica Mountains; that mule deer readily use Wyoming's highway underpasses; and that reintroduced fishers are flourishing on the Olympic Peninsula. And they've revealed wondrous relationships, like the coyote and the badger captured traipsing together through a California culvert on their way to hunt, like goofily mismatched partners in a buddy-cop comedy.

My own adventures in camera trapping began in central Colorado last winter, when, like Chapman, I resolved to learn the neighborhood. I set my cheap camera on national forest land, in a pine copse where hunters dumped deer carcasses. Soon my hard drive teemed with foxes gnawing at ribs and coyotes defecating in snow. I graduated to a wetland, where raccoons chased trout and moose rambled on spindly legs. I made the usual mistakes, pointing my camera toward tall grass whose every twitch triggered its motion-activated shutter. Yet my frequent errors only emphasized my occasional successes: Once you sift through a thousand videos of waving reeds, a single otter becomes all the more precious, like gold panned from a creek.

When I learned about Snapshot, I knew I had to take part, thereby recasting my time-consuming hobby as legitimate inquiry. The project, which began in 2019 and is now jointly run by the Smithsonian's Conservation Biology Institute and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, enlists biologists and community scientists to set up cameras within their local milieus and upload the photos to a database. The pictures' subjects are automatically identified by machine-learning software — trust me, no one wants to page through 4,000 photos of the same golden-mantled ground squirrel — and made available to any interested researcher. Roland Kays, the North Carolina State University biologist who co-founded the project, told me that it would eventually create a long-term data set showing regional and national trends. "After five or six years, now you can really start to see how species are doing," Kays said. If bobcats are declining in Arizona, black bears urbanizing in Washington, or California's gray foxes shifting north with climate change, camera traps can find out.

I asked Kays how long he expected Snapshot to continue. He shrugged. "Forever."

Snapshot has grown: In 2022, its coordinators began to loan cameras to universities and organizations that didn't have their own, including two tribal colleges in Montana, Fort Peck Community College and the Fort Belknap Reservation's Aaniiih Nakoda College. Rooney has also begun engaging with tribal colleges on Navajo and Lakota land — both to expand the project to reservations, which are among America's most biodiverse landscapes, and to provide opportunities for young Native biologists.

“It was a cool experience for our students, because a lot of them haven’t really done this,” Michael Kinsey, co-director of Aaniiih Nakoda’s research and education center and an enrolled member of the San Carlos Apache Tribe, told me. “Getting them to understand what the prairie ecosystem looks like, where these animals are moving, how to manage the data.” To camera-trap is to understand the world you inhabit.

ONCE I JOINED Snapshot, I needed a place to survey. A friend’s family owns 200 acres abutting Colorado’s Collegiate Peaks Wilderness, so one late-August afternoon we set our cameras there. (My single cheap camera was more toy than tool, so Kays and project co-founder Bill McShea loaned me eight Reconyxes — heavy-duty devices the approximate size and density of a brick.) We targeted dry washes and old logging two-tracks that afforded ready-made game trails, and beaver dams that created bridges over creeks. The world was strewn with the creaturely signs that Annie Dillard called “pennies cast broadside from a generous hand” — coyote scat, bear prints, elk rubs inscribed on aspen bark. The land felt rich with possibility, as though at any moment a cougar would glide out of the trees to bless our mission.

In this sense, camera trapping restores some of humankind’s most ancient relationships. “Animals,” British critic John Berger wrote in his 1980 book, *About Looking*, “first entered the imagination as messengers and promises.” They were our food, and sometimes our predators, but they were also metaphors, symbols and partners. Tortoises supported the world; elephants taught people to pound millet. The Anthropocene both killed wild animals and severed our connections with them. Evolutionary biologist Edward O. Wilson called our modern era the Eremocene, the Age of Loneliness, while botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer described us as suffering from “estrangement from the rest of Creation.” Once, we belonged to Animalia; then we conquered it. It’s lonely at the top.

If the Anthropocene has estranged us from creation, camera traps help us get reacquainted. Over two months, my cameras revealed an astonishing menagerie of non-human modes of being. A beaver hauled himself onto an old dam to evaluate its worthiness for renovation; a raccoon darted along its crest like an acrobat on a tightrope; a bobcat sauntered through the grass with archetypal feline haughtiness. Humans are inherently disruptive, and it’s nearly impossible to observe a creature in person without influencing its behavior; every animal we see is, in a sense, a reflection of ourselves. Camera traps document the world undistorted.

I’m not sure how much my photos will contribute to science. There were technical difficulties: Batteries died, fallen branches obscured lenses, memory cards clogged with thousands of photos of my old nemesis, wind-blown grass. Still, those cameras alleviated my own estrangement, and captured dozens of intimate moments that I never would have witnessed without their aid: the gray fox wandering the ponderosa grove, eyes bright and alert; the bull elk escorting his harem down a draw; the Abert’s squirrel that climbed atop a rotting stump to greet the sun as it fell slantwise through golden aspen. Each creature a messenger and a promise, yes — but also a wild life unto itself, one that continued long after it passed beyond the frame and out of human ken. ✺

POEM

Wherefore O Birds and Small Fish Surround Me

Roethke, “Praise to the End!”

By Robert Wrigley

As I bent to pick up a seed-bauble, my soul
staggered down. A chickadee’s comfort
blessed my head and heart. The soul will kneel awhile,
thank you, the soul shall bask in chickadee balm.
The sky being a cloud of blue fish says fly,
an atmosphere of water, the fish of the sky says fish,

blue at the depth of deep water.
Hang on, staggered soul. It’s not like you’re dying.
See the slender radicle emerge from the seed,
silver as salmon milt. Notice the tender regard from under
the chickadee’s black and dapper cap. Released
thus from plummet, soul rises but chest-high again.

WEB EXTRA Listen to Robert Wrigley recite his poem at **hcn.org/birds-and-small-fish**

Western train travel, once and future

The 1920s were a public-transit heyday.

BY JONATHAN THOMPSON
MAPPING BY LUNA ANNA ARCHEY

IMAGINE WALKING OUT the front door in, say, El Vado, New Mexico, Thermopolis, Wyoming, or even Lakeview, Oregon, strolling down to the depot, boarding a train and settling in for a trip to San Francisco, Denver, Chicago — even New York City. Once you arrive, you hop on a streetcar that ferries you to your final destination.

Such car-free travel might sound like the futuristic fantasy of a public transit geek, and, at the moment, that's what it is. But just over a century ago, it was reality: Back in the 1920s, the nation — even much of the rural West — was crisscrossed with rail lines that carried ore, timber, cattle and people to central rail hubs, where they could then continue onward to almost anywhere in the U.S. without ever needing an automobile. Streetcar systems — light rail's ancestor — were the norm in larger cities, with now car-centric cities like Los Angeles and Denver sporting extensive networks.

But then came the internal combustion engine, the passenger car and the cargo truck — and a whole fleet of industries to support them — along with plenty of cash to influence politicians and policy. Streetcars surrendered to bus lines, which gave way to private automobiles, wide-street suburbs and traffic jams. Highways sprang up, and slowly the rails were abandoned. By the 1980s, only a handful of major freight lines and a tourist railroad or two remained. Amtrak was relegated to borrowing the freight operators' tracks, where coal, oil and other goods have priority over people. Rail, especially passenger trains, virtually vanished from the Western U.S.

In recent decades, though, transportation officials and others fed up with the automobile's dominance have sought to revive portions of the rail service of yore, from building light rail systems in Denver and Phoenix to commuter rail in Utah to California's long-running effort to develop high-speed passenger trains.

We mapped the current state of the rails in the West, showing what was lost, what remains and what may someday come to be.

SOURCES: Amtrak, Four Corners Economic Development, All Aboard Northwest, Colorado Department of Transportation, Library of Congress, U.S. Department of Transportation, California High Speed Rail Authority, Nevada Rail Coalition, Nevada Department of Transportation.

All railway lines in the West in 1919

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, hundreds of miles of track were constructed across the Western U.S., in many cases by Japanese and Chinese immigrants. The railroad became one of settler-colonialism's most powerful weapons, bringing outsiders into stolen land to homestead it, claim it and mine it, ferrying ore, timber, cattle and other resources back to the industrial Midwest and East. But it also gave isolated rural and mountain-town residents a surprising level of mobility. Over the years, though, many of those lines were abandoned and torn up, leaving nothing but traces here and there. *(Base map includes Canadian and Mexican railway lines.)*

Railway lines in the West today

Since the mid-20th century, hundreds of miles of freight rail have been abandoned in the West, no longer needed to carry ore from mines to smelters. At the same time, some industries — including large-scale coal mining — remain completely reliant on the rails, so much so that a potential rail strike last year threatened to shut down all production at the massive Powder River Basin mines in Wyoming and Montana.

Existing freight rail lines, plus scenic and commuter lines
(Some lines are not currently in use and may not even have rails, but the right of way has yet to be abandoned.)

Amtrak routes

Proposed railway lines

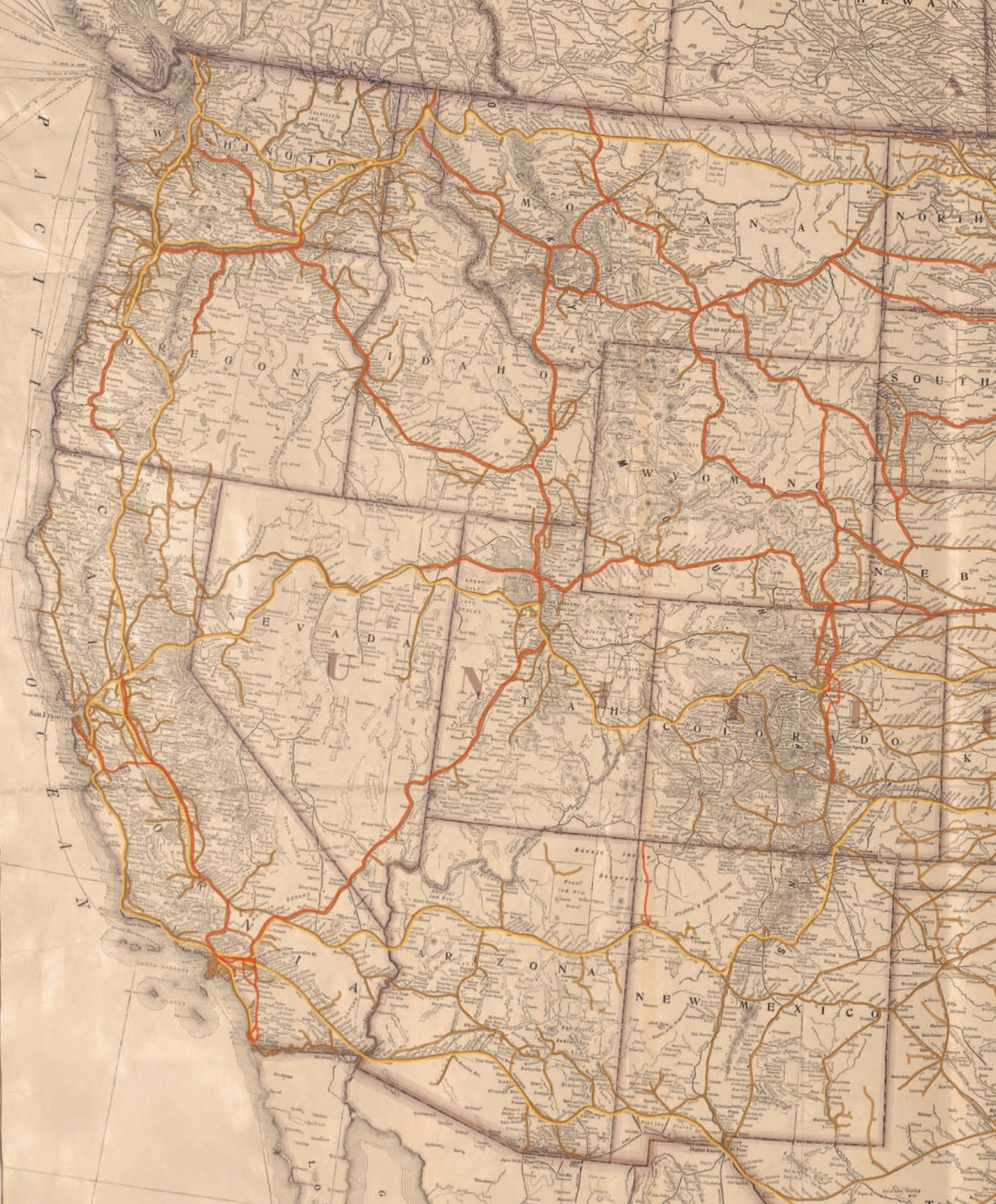
Speeding Across California: An effort to develop high-speed rail between San Francisco/Sacramento and Los Angeles has progressed lugubriously since the 1990s. Now the state hopes to fast-track a short segment in the Central Valley and have it operable by 2030.

Sin City Rails: This line would bring passengers to Sin City for the first time since 1997, when Amtrak dropped its Desert Wind route between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles.

Front Range Rail: Colorado is incrementally moving toward building commuter and high-speed rail to cut through traffic congestion along its crowded Front Range.

Farmington Freight: As northwest New Mexico's fossil fuel industries wane, local and tribal officials have been pushing for a freight line that they say would attract new industries. The proposed line, which would cross the Navajo Nation, is still in its very early stages.

Greater Northwest Passenger Rail: A coalition of local and state governments and nonprofits is pushing for better passenger rail service between North and South Dakota and the West Coast through Montana and Idaho.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HCN

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Now you can help the next generation know its peaks and valleys.

Consider leaving a legacy gift to *High Country News,* and join the Tom Bell Legacy Circle, by naming *HCN* in your will.

If you don't have a will yet and would like to take advantage of our free, easy template, or if you have already named *HCN* in your will and want to let us know about it, go to: **hcn.org/mywill**

HCN

Jalen Bazile and Rachel Olzer at Elevenmile Reservoir near Deckers, Colorado. **Adam Andres Pawlikiewicz Mesa**

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Your generous and dedicated support makes these pages possible.

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> *"Your service is critical to our survival as a democracy. Let EVERY voice be heard! Thank you, especially, for your careful reporting of Native American issues."*
>
> –Sally Alcoze, Camp Verde, Arizona

> *“Now more than ever, we need access to honest journalism. Thank you for everything that you do.”*
>
> –Leah Opitz, Sandpoint, Idaho

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Want to tell us why you support *HCN*?
Email **fundraising@hcn.org**

Future-proofing HCN

Board and staff are at work on long-term plans for the organization.

The *High Country News* Board of Directors met in January with a couple of serious topics up for discussion: our finances and a draft strategic plan.

Finances have been a nail-biter. Fall is our best time for fundraising, but we lagged behind into December, although, in the end, our readers came through once again. Between October and the end of the year, you contributed more than $300,000 — almost closing the budgetary gap. We still have work to do, but thanks to you, we ended the year in good shape.

The draft strategic plan is basically a blueprint for sustaining *HCN* over the long haul. We have big ambitions — we want to see more high-impact investigative reporting, as well as more timely news and analysis on our website, and we'd love to have more opportunities to meet face-to-face with readers. The board and staff have spent the past six months working on a plan for how to get to where we want to be despite the ups and downs that are sure to come.

Borrowing a tech industry term that's been repurposed by planners preparing for climate change, Acting Editor-in-Chief Michelle Nijhuis calls this "future-proofing."

Preserving our past

In January's column, I mentioned that we're looking for a home for a storage building full of *HCN's* papers and records. I got a flurry of responses from across the region, with suggestions including the Center of the American West at the University of Colorado Boulder, the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West, and special collections at Stanford and UCLA. I've also heard from folks at Colorado State University, New Mexico State University and History Colorado, not to mention the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, which holds the papers of *HCN* founder Tom Bell.

ghost towns
GAMBLING
hazardous
fossils
forests
forests: LOGGING II
flowers (see also plants)
fish and fishing

Hand-lettered files in the supersized fireproof photo cabinet, which holds a vast archive of images, some from back in the Lander, Wyoming, days. **HCN photo**

Thank you for all your suggestions. I'll be exploring options over the coming months. If you have any thoughts or ideas, please email me at **greghanscom@hcn.org**.

Greg Hanscom,
executive director and publisher

Farewells and welcomes

At the end of January, *HCN* said goodbye to **Kathy Martinez,** who had been with us for nearly 28 years — most recently as special projects manager and the manager of our customer service team in Paonia.

A chance run-in with **Betsy Marston** while volunteering at a school concession stand led to an ever-escalating string of roles, titles and responsibilities. "Every time *HCN* offered a temporary, fill-in position, I was all in," Kathy said recently. It's easy to understand how her energy and appetite for plowing through to-do lists and untangling knotty problems made her indispensable all these years.

She was also a steady source of help, comfort and home cooking, welcoming waves of interns and staffers to a new town when *HCN* was solely a Paonia operation. We'll miss her dearly.

We also welcomed some new faces to *HCN:*

- **Peter Schoenberg,** board member, a veteran defense lawyer based in New Mexico.
- **Raksha Vasudevan,** contributing editor, a former aid worker and a writer whose work has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, among other honors.
- **Taylar Stagner,** intern, an Arapaho and Shoshone journalist who reports from Wyoming primarily for our Indigenous Affairs desk.
- **Sam Shaw,** intern, a writer and photographer based on Colorado's Front Range.

Faces of *HCN*: from top, Kathy Martinez, Sam Shaw, Raksha Vasudevan, Taylar Stagner and Peter Schoenberg.

‘Gold in

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NO
SMOKING

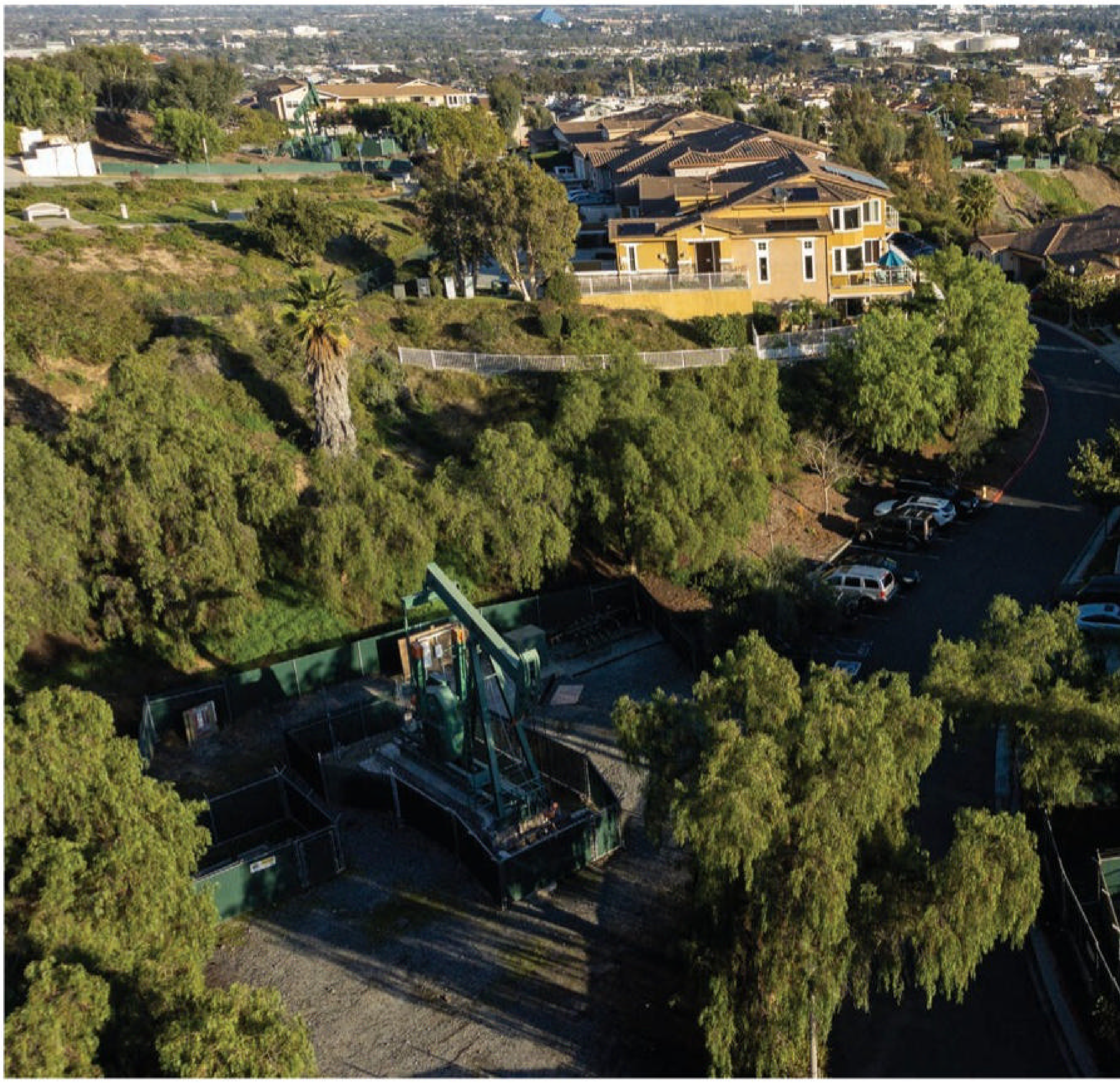
Signal Hill is a wealthy outlier amid Southern California’s oil extraction and production sites, which are more commonly situated in working-class Black and brown neighborhoods.

the Hills, But Not for Us’

Scenes from California’s backyard petroculture.

Photos by Tara Pixley | Poems by Vickie Vértiz

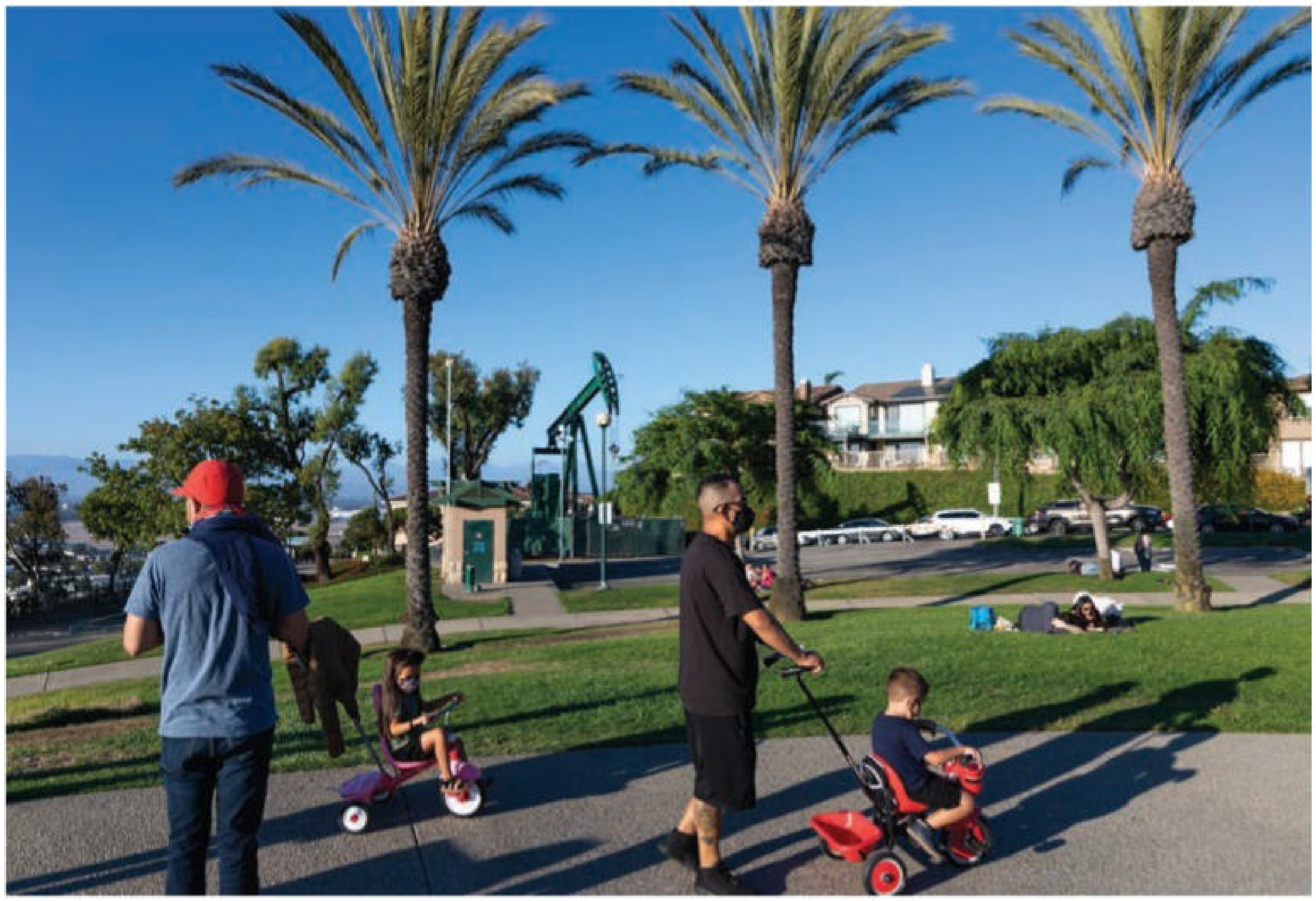
Tara Pixley's photography is supported by the Eyewitness Photojournalism Grant by Diversify Photo and the Pulitzer Center.

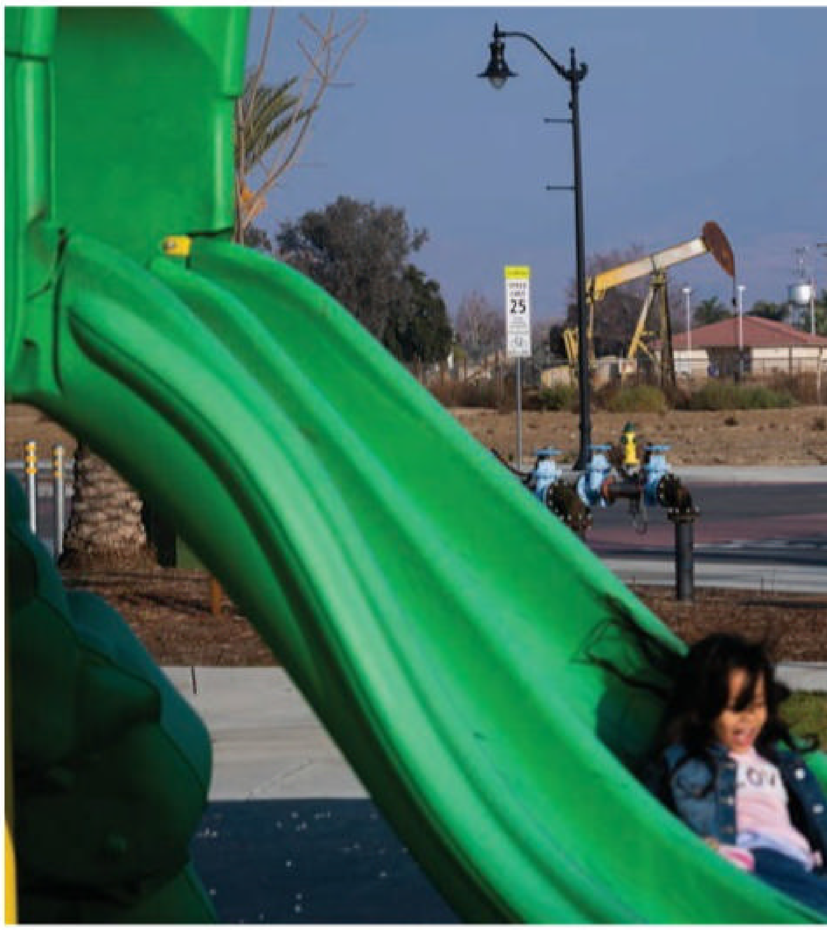


In the tony suburban enclave of Long Beach *(right)*, oil derricks are nestled among million-dollar homes.

In Signal Hill Park's scenic hilltop location *(below)*, which overlooks Long Beach's busy port, visitors picnic, play and lounge near active oil wells.

Zoe Sanchez *(below right)* plays at the Garden in the Sun playground in Arvin, a few hundred feet from an active oil well.





Diamond in the Back

Resplendent plastic snack bags and arboles
La luz que cae entre las ramas
The pump jack mete y saca la cabeza en la tierra. Escarba
Pass the jugo de naranja. The little ones have sticky fingers, Cheeto-red
Number 9. ¿Qué cae entre las ramas y hojas?

We got this place all to ourselves. Gold in the hills, but not for us
Eighteen rounds of slide slide slippity slide till we're out of breath

Thankful for chitlins and chicharrones. Duros. *You may not have,*
A car at all

Las hojas del eucalipto
The pump jack is hungry too, but its panza is full of gas
Baby hands reach for a fried wheat duro. Later their bellies will ache
But we'll think it's the chile. Blame it on the fried delicious culture
Tourists don't come to this park. Not enough hashtags
They're at the Observatory looking down on LA, on everybody
The palm trees aren't from here and neither are you

We are pastoral, playing soccer and playing The Spinners
The pepper trees are sacred. Branches for ceremony
The whole lot of us *sitting in the park, waiting for youuuuuuuu*

We've got biscuits and ribs. Tortillas, Tang, and Tajin for the fruit
Chili is acid and lemon is a panza bomb if you eat it long enough
Oil pools on the pan when you cook

Far away, on the Walk of Fame, gold and black etch in stone
We're still at the park struggling with our babies.
One day, though
A bare crape myrtle will bloom
Baby girl frosting pink. For you. Cruisin'
On a Sunday. After. Noon

What We Do Every Day is Activism

At 11 years old, I wanted to be on the escalator
Holding Justin Bieber's hand, holding my breath. Fresh
From a dance-off in the bowling alley
Under red laser lights in my lip gloss

I should have been warned. *I should have been worried*
About my cursive. Instead I held my breath, carried
By my mother from room to room, I was so weak

At 10 years old I was worried about explosions
Like tree roots, oil wells are connected underground
To other wells. If one explodes, they all go
Oil companies have strung many generations of cancer
Here. Birth defects. Asthma. Petróleo fire dots raining from the sky

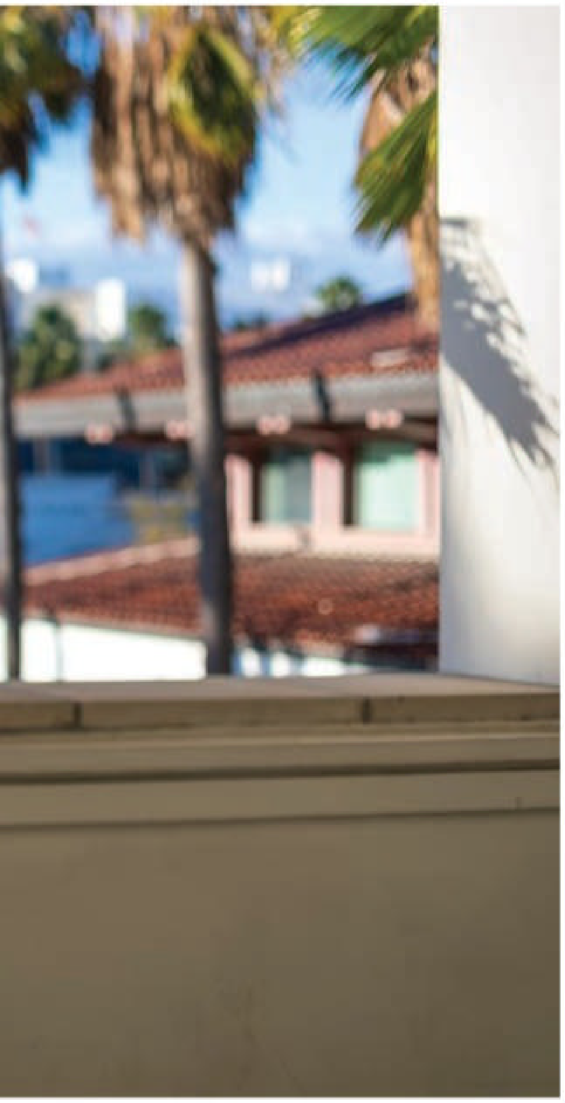
Mr. President, 580,000 people in Los Angeles live near active oil wells
1 in 3 families in Wilmington have experienced cancer
How do we end environmental racism?
Stop urban oil extraction. *Why haven't you done that?*

Everything my neighborhood does is activism
Frontline ballads blare from Toyotas, Fords, going to work
When we're not sick. We hear Bolinas smells real different
They hide the road signs
So they can't be found. A phantom beach town
White privilege is a disappearing act

Carbon neutral politicians and *2045 is so far away*
AllenCo borders nine schools, an infant
Daycare center. A senior housing facility
Nowhere to go because the rent's too damn high
It's been too damn high. The line keeps moving
But the check stays the same

Man, fuck this place, and by place I mean
The land lords. The mayor who's mad that poor people
Will suffer once the oil leaves town. It left us a long
Time ago. In Kern *the pollution is everywhere*
You can smell it, it dries out
Your eyes and your throat

And we continue
Walking to the corner store. To the arroyo to see the willows
Bend. To the saúco negro for healing colds and coughs
Filling piñatas with purple paletas and happy
Meal toys, the good kind
Our kids climbing up the coast live oaks
Opening the bags of chips, pizza boxes
Lighting the birthday candles
So many of us in the park, we become the black walnut grove
Our ears dangle with beaded leaves, hojas y brazos
Our roots connected underground. Our necks adorned
with turquoise and tiger eye. Malaquite
Hopeful that change is coming
The young people, they're leading it
There is no future in oil
There never was



Environmental justice activist Nalleli Cobo *(above left)* stands at the gates of the now-shuttered Los Angeles AllenCo Energy site, holding a photo of herself as a child. Growing up in an apartment across from the oil extraction facility, Cobo experienced such debilitating nosebleeds that she had to sleep sitting up. At 19, she was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer that decimated her reproductive organs.

Jose Mirales *(above)* has lived in Kern County most of his life and raised four daughters in Lamont, a rural suburb of Bakersfield. When Mirales had a stroke and began daily liver dialysis a few years ago, he began to worry about how Kern County's undrinkable water and visibly toxic air would impact his ongoing health issues.

Culver City's first Black mayor, Dr. Daniel Lee *(far left)*, was a key proponent of a 2021 Culver City Council ordinance that will phase out oil production within city limits.

For years, Magali Sanchez-Hall *(left)* has fought the environmental racism experienced by the working-class people of Wilmington.

In Arvin, oil derricks bob up and down in fields of carrots, grapes and other produce *(right).* Kern County is the nation's number-two producer of agriculture as well as its seventh-largest oil-producing county.

The Los Angeles Marathon Oil Refinery *(far right)*, the West Coast's largest oil refinery, borders Carson and Wilmington, two predominantly working-class cities with majority Black and brown populations. Wilmington residents experience asthma, cancer and other health issues at much higher rates than people who do not live in such close proximity to oil infrastructure.

Community activist Magali Sanchez-Hall *(right)* talks about the cancer clusters among her Wilmington neighbors, who also experience unusually high rates of asthma as well as often unexplained nosebleeds and migraines. Wilmington is home to every stage of oil production, Sanchez-Hall said, from drilling and refining to shipping the final product out of the state.

Here's a Flag in Case You Forgot This, Too, Is Stolen

Listen, oil well owner. The church that leases the land the well is on
You operate year-to-year. You net and you are gross
How do these wells not open you?
They open every pore around us. The air left behind a decrepit
Oilfield, like your rotting teeth if only you didn't have health
insurance

At the liquid bottom of debits and credits is a hole
Your fake concern for losing wells belongs in there
A liquid arraignment seeping out of your mouths
So much lip service, those lips must be chappity chapped
Crusty like the rust on discarded pumps, *littering the almond groves*
Used, used-enough pumpjacks flow mechanically

And here, the equalizer should be death
And life, but they're not all worth the same amount
Mr. Foundation-for-college-scholarships-that-don't-pay-for-shit

Without oil, the whole town will close. No books, libraries, or
hospitals
Arguments as counterweights, a horse head in the bed
Bridal sucker rod talk. Full of gas
Move over, you leva. The foundation cracked. Gas seeping
Into your Cadillac. Your ranch house and retirement plan

Revenues urge a catastrophic warming. Looming. You peaked in '85
But the hairspray is still in the can. Declining. Quietly bobbing.
Kern loves property tax revenue from oil, but it has California's
highest poverty rates
Why are they so poor with so much oil money? Who's taking home
the net.
it's not me, her face says. Looking off into a distant future, something
Too far away.

Mayors are mad because they're shutting down the wells
Fool, you are mad at the wrong thing. The real bad guys are
White sheets and eye holes at the conference table. Redlining
The gender pay gap.

Every last drop we can get. Later is too late, Kern. Shafter
Pump jacks clink. One day, you and your pipes
Will lie, will lay, will rot in groves of yellow grass
Join the gray sky you left behind

THE SENTINEL

What does a statue dedicated to the mothers of Butte, Montana, reveal about women's rights?

By Leah Sottile | Illustrations by Cristiana Couceiro

SHE STANDS IN THE WIND, 8,510 feet atop the jagged Continental Divide. At a place where the Northern Rocky Mountains slice through the dry brown summer landscape like a saw blade, she is always waiting, watching over the people of Butte, Montana. Her broad, blank face is framed by a veil made of steel and her hands emerge from the folds of a long flowing dress, palms forward. In the dark night sky, she shines bright white, lit up by spotlights near her feet. Officially, she is called Our Lady of the Rockies, but most people here simply call her "the Lady."

At 5,539 feet above sea level — higher than any other major city in the state — Butte is often frigid, and temperatures hover near zero for months. Most of the year, the statue of the Lady is surrounded by deep, impassable snow, so it's only during the brief window of warm summer weather that visitors can see her up close. Ambitious pilgrims might hike up steep switchbacks to get to her, but most pay a few dollars to take a bus up a winding, rocky dirt road carved into the mountainside.

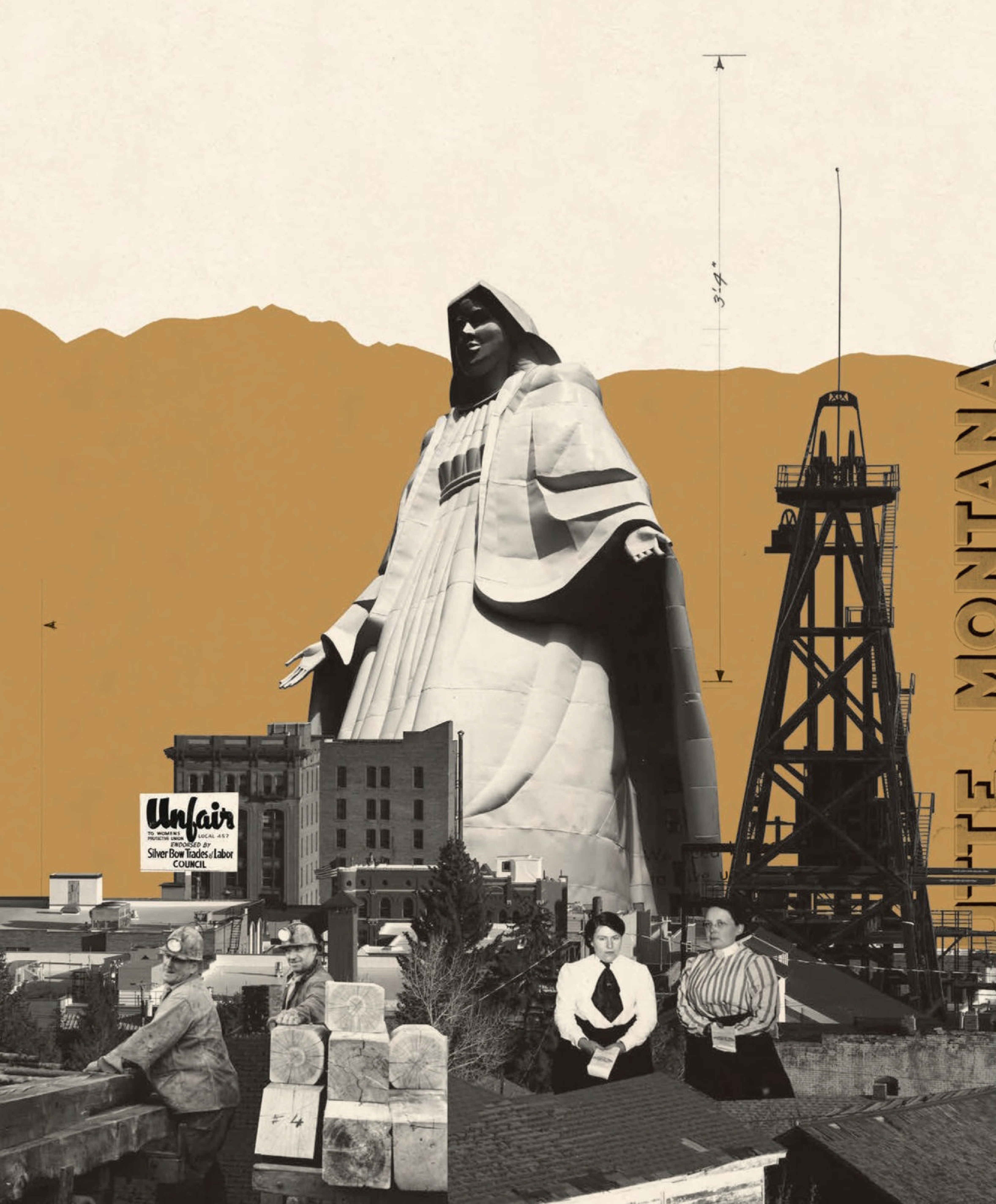
The statue was constructed in 1985, when the economy of Butte, which relied on jobs at the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and the Atlantic Richfield Company, all but collapsed as the mines largely shut down. A group of local men banded together to build a statue of the Virgin Mary, a project originally conceived by a local worker whose wife was severely ill. Guided, they felt, by a divine hand, they coated steel panels in white paint and welded them together until, eventually, the shape of a woman, 90 feet tall, emerged. Once she finally stood in place, they dedicated her "to women everywhere, especially mothers."

"The story is *so* Butte," Christy Hays Pickett, a local folk musician, said, standing at the foot of the Lady last summer. From Butte, the Lady looks immaculate, but up close, she looks tired and worn, rumpled in places, the white paint now blotchy and gray, as if the hem of her dress has been dragging around in the dirt of some earthly, non-celestial place.

"All these people came together to make this," Hays Pickett said. "And they did it because so many people were out of work. It was this true labor of love, and I feel like that story resonates in this community over and over again."

Butte is a city of stories about hardrock miners, labor unions warring in the streets, legendary rebels and insatiable corporate greed. These tales of work and workers are passed down through generations in high school classrooms, over dinner tables and at local landmarks. In these stories, Butte is defined by all it once had, everything workers endured and everything they lost.

Hays Pickett turned to follow the statue's long gaze: To the west, range after range after range of mountains fade out to the horizon in shades of withering blue. Below, next to Butte's compact grid of streets and homes, three


3'4"
Unfair
TO WOMENS PROTECTIVE UNION LOCAL 457
ENDORSED BY
Silver Bow Trades & Labor
COUNCIL
TTE, MONTANA

gigantic chasms dwarf the city, each gouged out of the Earth by miners and their machines.

Hays' husband was down there, driving a truck across the bottom of one of the craters — an active copper and molybdenum mine. Another is a massive tailings pond, though "pond" undersells its size: It is an enormous and unnatural lake where the active mine's waste is stored, held back by a 750-foot-high dam that Montana Resources is currently making even taller.

And nestled closest to Butte is the hole that gave it its modern-day reputation: the Berkeley Pit. It's a former copper mine that closed in 1982, now filled with 50 billion gallons of poisonous blue-green water that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said will require treatment "in perpetuity," like a wound that will never heal. Since 1983, when the EPA declared the area a Superfund site, it has been one of the largest cleanup projects in the country.

Around Montana, people raise their eyebrows or turn up their noses at the mere mention of Butte because of this: it is the place with the toxic pit. And, somewhere along the way, Butte seemed to understand it was being ostracized and decided to be the one doing the ostracizing. Locals began calling their city "Butte, America," forgoing any state affiliation. They described themselves as "Butte Tough" and splashed "Butte vs. Everybody" across T-shirts — delineations that felt less like civic slogans, and more like civic callouses.

Mining employs only about 300 people in Butte now, but it still shapes life here. Old-timers might tell someone to "tap 'er light" — a callback to when dynamite was tapped carefully into underground holes, but today suggests that someone should both have a good day and stay alive as best they can. Visitors pay $2 to gaze into the Berkeley Pit from a viewing stand; the Chamber of Commerce collects the money. Homes sit on wide streets named Copper and Zinc and Quartz and Aluminum.

At first glance, demographic history could explain why a towering statue of the Virgin Mary looks out over this city: Thousands of miners from around the world flooded into Butte in the late 1800s, especially Irish Catholics. By 1900, Butte was 36% Irish. Today, there are four active Catholic churches and an Irish American population that, per capita, exceeded even Boston's, as of the 2010 census.

The story most often told about the Lady is the story of the men who made her: their actions, their beliefs and their struggles. Left out of that story are the women of Butte — who they were before the statue was built, and who they have become since.

In June 2022, a majority-Christian bloc of United States Supreme Court justices overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark decision that, for 50 years, affirmed the constitutional right to abortion. The reversal of *Roe* sparked widespread concern that religious beliefs were seeping into law. Editorial writers debated whether the separation of church from public life was actually a utopian creed rather than an unbreakable code.

Montana voters, in recent years, have turned the state a bright shade of red on electoral maps, ushering a Republican supermajority into the Statehouse. Yet most Montanans still believe that abortion should be legal.

Butte is one of Montana's Democratic strongholds, and people were angry when *Roe* fell. A crowd gathered outside the Butte-Silver Bow Courthouse, where Monica Tranel, a Democratic candidate running for the U.S. House of Representatives, yelled from the stone steps. "This is about power and control!" she shouted. "This is about the oligarchs having power over us, the people. And we here in Butte, America? We *know* how to be the voice of the people."

Amanda Curtis, a former state legislator from Butte who now leads the Montana Federation of Public Employees, the state's largest labor union, interpreted the decision to overturn *Roe* as a direct attack on women's ability to work and, as a result, a direct attack on everything at the core of Butte.

"To take away a woman's right to decide how and when and if she procreates is so fundamentally offensive," she said. "Our independence from men or from any partner, for that matter, depends on our ability to earn enough money to pay rent and gas and buy groceries and have heat. Having kids puts more expense on you, and at the same time takes away your ability to make money."

By the time *Roe* was struck down, the Lady on the mountain had come to represent something bigger, perhaps, than its builders ever imagined: not just Mary, not just mothers, not just women, but rather female power and agency. It represented how Butte sees women, remembers women — and also how it has failed to see and remember them.

FOR TENS OF THOUSANDS OF YEARS, the Pend d'Oreille and Salish people have lived in what is now called western Montana, harvesting bitterroot in spring, then camas and wild rose in the summer. The valley where Butte sits was a common hunting area, where people fished the clear waters of Snt̓apqey, now called Silver Bow Creek, with arrows.

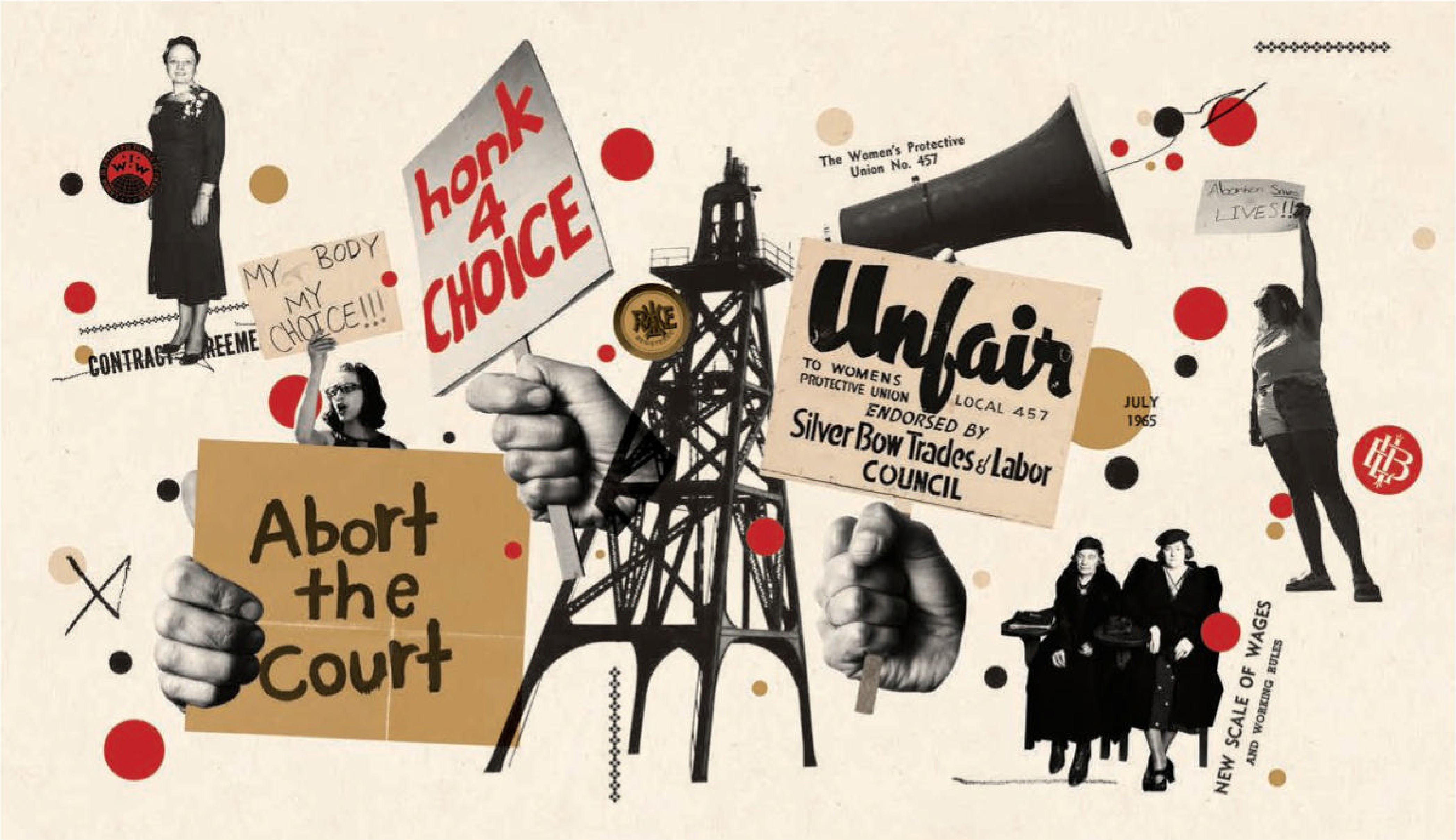
The easternmost edge of Salish and Pend d'Oreille territory extends to where the city of Anaconda is now, 24 miles west of Butte. In 1855, the Hellgate Treaty ceded 12 million acres of Indigenous land to the United States; the people were forcibly moved to the Flathead Reservation, far to the northwest.

Catholicism had already arrived: In the 1820s, Catholic Iroquois employed by fur-trading companies told the Salish and Pend d'Oreille of the "black robes" — Jesuit priests — and, in 1831, the tribes dispatched representatives to St. Louis, asking missionaries to return West with them. In 1840, Father Pierre-Jean De Smet traveled to the region to preach the Gospel.

But Indigenous stories aren't widely celebrated in Butte. The stories it tells and re-tells are copper-colored — tales from that post-colonial moment when America became a capitalist paradise and Butte its gilded Garden of Eden.

Butte began as a silver-mining camp in the mid-1860s. But after rich veins of copper were discovered in the early 1880s, a five-square-mile section of the town was heavily mined, producing about a quarter of the world's copper supply, and roughly half of the United States', within two decades. By 1882, the mines had produced 9 million pounds of copper; by 1896, they had unearthed 210 million.

The world rushed to Butte: Men from China and Finland, Ireland and Sweden, Italy and Serbia and Germany scrambled toward Montana, vying for jobs in mines run by the Anaconda company and others. Back then, the city was thick with acrid, arsenic-laden smoke from smelters dotting the landscape. Sometimes it was so thick, street lights were turned on at midday. "The thicker the fumes the greater our financial vitality," boasted the


MY BODY MY CHOICE!!!
honk 4 CHOICE
CONTRACT REEME
Abort the Court
The Women's Protective Union No. 457
Unfair
TO WOMENS PROTECTIVE UNION LOCAL 457
ENDORSED BY
Silver Bow Trades & Labor COUNCIL
JULY 1965
Abortion Saves LIVES!!
NEW SCALE OF WAGES AND WORKING RULES

local newspaper. "Butteites feel best when the fumes are thickest." Mining waste was dumped in piles around the city. All the trees were cut down to make way for the mines.

Meanwhile, the Copper Kings made Butte their playground. The millionaires exerted political influence and controlled the newspapers. By 1888, William Clark had built a 34-room mansion in Uptown Butte, uphill from the rest of the city, for the equivalent of $8 million today. The buildings of Uptown, now part of one of the nation's largest National Historic Landmark districts, still show off the gilded side of the city's past: Streets are dotted with palatial brick Victorians, addresses painted on in flakes of 24-karat gold. The Hotel Finlen still drips with crystal chandeliers.

But 14 long-shuttered mining headframes tell a darker story. The sharp angles of black steel, once used to lower miners about a mile underground, now loom on the skyline like tombstones to the dead hardrock mining industry. Each bears a sign denoting the mine's name, depth — and the number of people who went down and never came up again. The Original: 43. The Anselmo: 36. The Con: 172. In early June 1917, 168 miners suffocated at the Granite Mountain/Speculator Mine. Between 1870 to 1983, some 2,500 men lost their lives in the mines. This gained Butte a grim nickname: the "City of Widows."

The poor working conditions impelled labor unions to rise and become a powerful force in the city. The Butte Workingmen's Union No. 1 formed in the 1870s, and within two decades it evolved into the first chapter of the Western Federation of Miners. By 1900, some 18,000 local tradesmen had unionized, a third of them miners.

With unionization came bloodshed, culminating in 1914 in a series of riots, when miners clashed in the streets over whether the WFM was serving their best interests. An acting mayor who called for calm was thrown out of a second-story window. Bullets flew, killing a bystander. The union hall was ransacked, then dynamited. Today, a plaque remembering the explosion hangs over a pile of century-old broken bricks, left where they fell.

The Anaconda company reacted violently, too. At one point, guards shot at strikers, killing one and injuring 16 others. On the night of Aug. 1, 1917, Frank Little, a famed Industrial Workers of the World leader who'd come to Butte to rally miners, was rousted from sleep by six unknown assailants — widely believed to have been hired by the company — dragged behind a car and lynched from a railroad trestle.

At Mountain View Cemetery, a graveyard across from a Walmart, Little's grave lies in a quiet corner while the Lady watches from the ridge above. It's surrounded by a shin-high cast iron fence threaded with fabric flowers. His headstone reads: "Slain by capitalist interests for organizing and inspiring his fellow men."

In winter, offerings left by mourners are covered in a dusting of snow: A handful of coins, a half-drunk bottle of whiskey. A pair of stiff work gloves, the palms upturned and filled with bullets.

THEN THERE ARE THE STORIES of Butte's women.

In 1890, the Women's Protective Union set out to create solidarity for female workers.

"The ladies of Butte — God bless them! — are not going to be behind their brothers in demanding their rights," read one article published at the time. Ellen Crain, former director of the Butte-Silver Bow Archives, said that WPU membership was open to anyone who had the potential to have a child. "Basically, you had to have a uterus." Cooks, usherettes, bucket girls (who packed thousands of lunches for miners every day) and maids were eligible to join.

The WPU organized under the Western Federation of Miners. "So if they went on strike, 6,000 men would go on strike with them," Crain said. "They were smart, because they knew where the force was."

"It was not in the bylaws that sex workers were not allowed, nor was it in the bylaws that they would be allowed, but we have no evidence they were ever part of the union," she said. Historians have documented how large-scale sex work operations often emerged side-by-side with mining camps around the West, and Butte was no exception: Butte's sex workers were operating at least one hurdy-gurdy house by 1878, and soon the city had its own bustling red-light district full of working-class "female boarding houses." There were cribs — clusters of cubicle-sized rooms where low-paid sex workers serviced their clients — near high-society brothels with names like The Windsor, The Royal and The Dumas.

Sex workers were seen as "'public women,' belonging to all men, not one man, and therefore not quite women at all," Mary Murphy, a historian and professor at Montana State University, wrote in 1984.

According to scholars, the sex trade bolstered the mining companies' power. "Prostitution and other forms of vice, like everything else, ultimately served the company," Ellen Baumler, an interpretive historian at the Montana Historical Society, wrote in 1998. "A thriving (red-light) district meant that thousands of single miners would spend their time and paychecks on entertainment rather than organizing against their bosses."

Newspaper archives support the theory: In January 1902, as Butte aldermen debated whether or not the red-light district should be relocated, one official admitted that "we are getting part of our salaries from the price of the shame of these people." The police chief told the council that he kept 10% of the fines he levied against women in the red-light district each month — "as in preceding administrations." The aldermen agreed to leave the brothels alone.

> "Watch — we'll put a gigantic statue on the Continental Divide, and we'll fly it into place with a Sikorsky Skycrane helicopter. Who thinks of this shit?"

Employment opportunities for women were scarce. Even during World War II, union officials at the Anaconda company and other surrounding outfits refused to employ them in the mines. They confronted a "dichotomous ideology that viewed women as either good or bad," Murphy wrote in her book *Mining Cultures: Men, Women and Leisure in Butte, 1914-41*. The city codified this polarization in 1914, when the council passed an official vagrancy ordinance that drew a moralistic line between "women" and "lewd and dissolute female persons," and threatened to arrest women who acted in an "improper, profane or obscene manner within the sight or hearing of women."

Between 1895 and 1920, 101 of the 103 Butte women who died violently were working women, the type of women that the Women's Protective Union ostensibly hoped to shield from workplace abuse. Twenty-five of them were sex workers not in the union. "These assaults seemed to have occurred in direct correlation with women's attempts to expand their horizons or improve their position," according to a master's thesis in history by an MSU student in the mid 1980s.

"Challenging traditional roles," the thesis read, "resulted in their deaths."

This intense scrutiny of women was not lost on Mary MacLane, who, in 1902, having just graduated high school, broke into the literary world seemingly overnight with her portrayal of life in Butte in a book she originally titled *I Await the Devil's Coming*. According to Murphy, MacLane was "the child of failed fortune," led to Butte by her stepfather, who moved her family into a two-story red house. He hoped to strike it rich but did not succeed.

MacLane's memoir was a fearless confessional by a young woman desperate to claim her identity — she was bisexual, feminist, radical — but feeling trapped in a city of "dry, warped" people that she felt could not understand her. She wandered Butte at night, concluding that her female body was hampering her ambitions: "Had I been born a man, I would by now have made a deep impression of myself on the world," she wrote. "But I am a woman."

MacLane's memoir later drew the praise of Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, but one of Butte's newspapers called her a mental freak.

Today, the women of Butte are remembered quietly, if at all. There is no plaque outside MacLane's house, and most of the red-light district has been demolished.

But there is a plaque on Mercury Street, affixed to the red-brick Dumas brothel, which officially shut down operations in 1982 — 65 years after prostitution was outlawed in Montana. An out-of-towner owns the building, in which there is a small museum that is accessible only by appointment.

Inside The Dumas, information about its history is printed on paper and glued onto poster boards nailed to the cracked walls. Down a chipped and water-stained staircase, beds are crammed into musty rooms, and empty liquor bottles and piles of loose change are flung onto dressers.

"Most history like this disappears," Chris Fisk, a retired Butte High history teacher, said. "We're privileged to have it still standing. It's as authentic as you can get."

The Dumas operated at the direction of a woman known as Ruby Garrett. In 1959, after Garrett's common-law husband beat her while she was pregnant, causing her to miscarry, she strode into a local card room and shot him five times. Then she sat down and had a beer. "I wasn't going to take it anymore," she told law enforcement upon her arrest for murder.

Garrett's story often comes up when people are asked about the history of women in Butte: a story of female power gained only by responding to male violence with even greater violence.

After her release from prison, Garrett became the last madam of The Dumas, later telling historians that she purchased the silence of local police for $200-$300 a month. After a robbery in 1981 thrust The Dumas into the headlines, Garrett pled guilty to underpaying federal income taxes for money she made at the brothel, and she padlocked the building for good. Before she reported to prison, radio spots ran in Butte for a farewell potluck at a local bar: "Gather your friends," it said, "it's a going-away party for your friend Ruby Garrett." A reporter wrote an article about the party, where "one comment was uttered repeatedly: 'she was providing a public service.'"

In the late 1990s, an organization called the International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education struck a deal with the then-owner of The Dumas in an attempt to preserve it as a museum of Western sex work, run in part by former sex workers. "You're going to have a high potential of being designated the capital of the sex industry for the entire United States," one speaker said at a meeting of concerned citizens. Another said the museum would attract pedophiles. "Your children are going to start to disappear," she said. The plan fizzled.

Across the street from The Dumas stood the Blue Range Cribs, the last of the places where women had once displayed themselves in a line of windows, tapping on the glass with rings to attract potential customers. In 2021, it was torn down.

Buildings like the Blue Range are "beautiful pieces of history that we're never gonna get back," Fisk said, pausing at one of The Dumas' upstairs windows to look out at the dusty vacant lot where the Blue Range stood. Our Lady of the Rockies watched from the snowy ridge, placid and permanent.

Amanda Curtis, who runs the Montana Federation of Public Employees, was blunter: "When Butte demolished that building, they demolished the record of women's history in Butte."

Around a nearby parking lot stand black sheet-metal silhouettes. Some represent men, walking toward the nearly invisible red-light district; others are women in petticoats, forever calling out to an elusive customer.

GARRETT WAS STILL running The Dumas in 1985, when a group of Butte laborers began building their statue to women and mothers. After the local mining industry transitioned from underground hardrock mining to open-pit mining, and as the price of copper dropped, work dried up. The population of the once-bustling metropolis plummeted. In 1920, it was 41,000; today, it's almost 20% less.

In the late 1970s, an electrician named Bob O'Bill — a "tough bohunk," according to his 2016 obituary — was devastated by his wife Joyce's sudden illness. According to an account by one of the statue's builders, a friend of O'Bill's urged him to pray directly to Our Lady of Guadalupe — one of the Virgin Mary's Catholic titles — as his wife underwent emergency surgery.

"Please, Holy Mary, help my wife through this operation," O'Bill prayed. "If you do, I'll build a statue of you and put it on the mountains overlooking Butte."

When Joyce recovered, it must have felt like divine intervention. O'Bill told everyone he knew about his plan to build a statue. A group of men decided to keep themselves busy by helping.

The land had to be rearranged to make space for the Lady: dynamited, flattened, a road carved up the rugged mountainside. Welders used their tools to sculpt. For years, the statue's massive bodiless head sat off Interstate 90, staring blankly. The project was funded by donations from the community and the laborers themselves. Eventually, they would borrow thousands from the Department of Defense to get the statue up the mountain.

Jim Keane, a former miner and a state legislator of nearly two decades who helped build the Lady, described feeling something like a holy presence, as if a hand was on the builders' backs, nudging them forward. "There was so many things that happened that you just said, 'Hey, there's a bigger power here than us,'" Keane said. "Mary wanted it up there."

But not everyone liked the Lady.

"I do not see why one person's desires for a religious shrine ... should need to be in public view," reads one letter sent to the local newspaper. "This project is, to me, no different than any other huge commercial installation. A 90-foot beer bottle would hardly be more of an eyesore." People worried religion was seeping into public life.

Even local Catholic leaders bristled: One priest told *The Missoulian* he thought donations for the statue should be given to unemployed or elderly people in Butte. The bishop of the Diocese of Helena, which includes Butte, wrote letters to the builders, quibbling over whether the statue really represented the Virgin Mary — the builders said it did, but that it was also dedicated to all women, regardless of their religion. The bishop found that contradictory, writing "either the statue is a representation of Mary the Mother of Jesus, or it is not" — even though it seemed obvious to everyone that it was. But at least one person outside of Butte was very enthusiastic about the project: Then-President Ronald Reagan, a staunch Republican, sent a letter to the builders. "Nancy and I," he wrote, "were indeed interested to learn about the statue of Mary, Mother of Jesus, being constructed atop the Continental Divide." Reagan called it "the spirit of Americanism at work."

Finally, starting on Dec. 17, 1985, an Army National Guard crew used a helicopter to fly the Lady, piece by piece, to her perch over four days. From playgrounds and backyards, the people of Butte craned their necks, watching as, high above them, a dress, a pair of hands, a torso, and finally, a head, were set into place on the ridge.

"I think what Our Lady of the Rockies provided was that little string of hope that we can do anything, we can survive anything," Fisk, the former history teacher, said. "Watch — we'll put a gigantic statue on the Continental Divide, and we'll fly it into place with a Sikorsky Skycrane helicopter. Who thinks of this shit?"

Today, some people in Butte scoff at the statue, seeing it as a flagrant attempt to grab tourists off the interstate. They grin and whisper nicknames, off the record: the Mountain Bitch; "Chernobyl Mary," for the way she glows all night. Many lifelong residents said they barely even notice her. And yet others pray to her for miracles.

"It's not a Catholic statue, even though people want to make it out to be that way," Keane insisted. During an interview last spring, he referred to the statue only as "Mary."

"Everybody has respect for their mother, whether you're a woman or a man," he explained. "And I would say that's the representation there. It's a respect for women."

Ellen Crain disagreed, calling it "a man's symbol." But she thinks it's also an acknowledgment of the ways women "did hold crap together for everybody." When miners left to find jobs in other states in the 1980s, many left their families in Butte and sent money home. "Just because of the sheerness of having to be in charge of everything, they just kept growing themselves as women," Crain said. "And they didn't look back to a time where their husbands expected them to get dinner.

"That was a real lesson to lots of young women today."

Inside a combination art gallery, print-making studio and coffee shop in Uptown called the Imagine Butte Resource Center, the walls feature several pieces by a local artist named BT Livermore. Recently, Livermore posed for the front page of the local newspaper, *The Montana Standard*, with a mural they painted that proclaimed, "It's Better in Butte."

For the project, Livermore researched Butte's marketing history and found that, back in the mid-20th century, the city's attitude lacked the chip on its shoulder of "Butte vs. Everybody."

"I found a bumper sticker that says 'Butte is my town, and I like it,'" they said. "I don't see stuff like that here now."

Livermore understands the bitterness. Butte "is a shining example of what capitalist interests can do to trample over the needs of people in the city," they said. But in their experience, this place is about more than its hard-nosed history. Livermore moved to Butte after more than a decade in Portland. "I had issues with my own gender that I was working out," they said, but it was around the time Livermore moved to Butte that they felt ready to come out as nonbinary. "I did feel an acceptance here," they said. "If I had a really wild nail polish color on, the only comments I've ever gotten in Montana are 'That color looks really good on you.'"

The love that Livermore feels from the people of Butte makes its way into their work: Tote bags read "Abso-Butte-ly!" and postcards say, "Butte Could Really Use Someone Like You."

"It's not about history, it's not about mining, it's, 'We're here now,'" Livermore said. "People still live here.'"

At a table inside the IBRC, Livermore and their partner, Karlee Jane, described Our Lady of the Rockies as a light they look for at the end of long road trips. When they can't see it from their upstairs windows, they know a storm is rolling in. "I like being in Butte, knowing that we're the city that has the Lady in the mountains," Jane said. "What other community has that?"

But both agree that they find the builders' dedication to women and mothers hollow. "It's not even a part of the conversation that people have around town about it," Livermore said.

"We're supposed to revere all mothers, and it's just like, do we have to? Really?" said Jane, who is the mother of three. "Because not all mothers are good mothers. I always feel weird being put on a pedestal.

"It just feels like this false idol," she said. "Because it's all words and no actions — or actions that I'm not seeing affect the community."

At the base of the statue is a small chapel whose outer walls are lined with thousands of plaques of women's names, purchased by loved ones. Several times a week the *Standard* prints well-wishes under an illustration of the Lady. "Stop by our shop in the Butte Plaza Mall for unique gifts and religious items,"promotional language reads.

Requests for comment sent to the Our Lady of the Rockies foundation for this story went unanswered; when reached by phone, the head of the nonprofit — one of the project's original workers — declined to comment.

According to Jane and Livermore, the current conversation around the Lady and its dedication is part of a bigger awakening in Butte. "People are coming around to, 'No, we need to honor (madams), because they were the movers and shakers,'" Jane said. "And they just don't get talked about because they weren't the movers and shakers that people maybe wanted."

"Or they weren't the ones that owned the newspapers," Livermore added. "Or the mines."

AROUND THE WORLD, copper and the Virgin Mary are often intertwined: Our Lady of Charity stands near copper mines in Cuba. In Chuquicamata, Chile, where the Anaconda company operated mines, revelers celebrating La Virgen de Guadalupe fill the streets each year.

Bridget Kevane, who teaches Latino Studies at Montana State University in Bozeman, said she was initially surprised to see the Lady when she first moved to Montana. "We had statues like that outside my school in Puerto Rico," she said. To her, the Lady clearly resembled La Virgen, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*. "The Mexican Catholic faith really hinges on the Guadalupe. She's more important than God, definitely, and probably even Jesus.

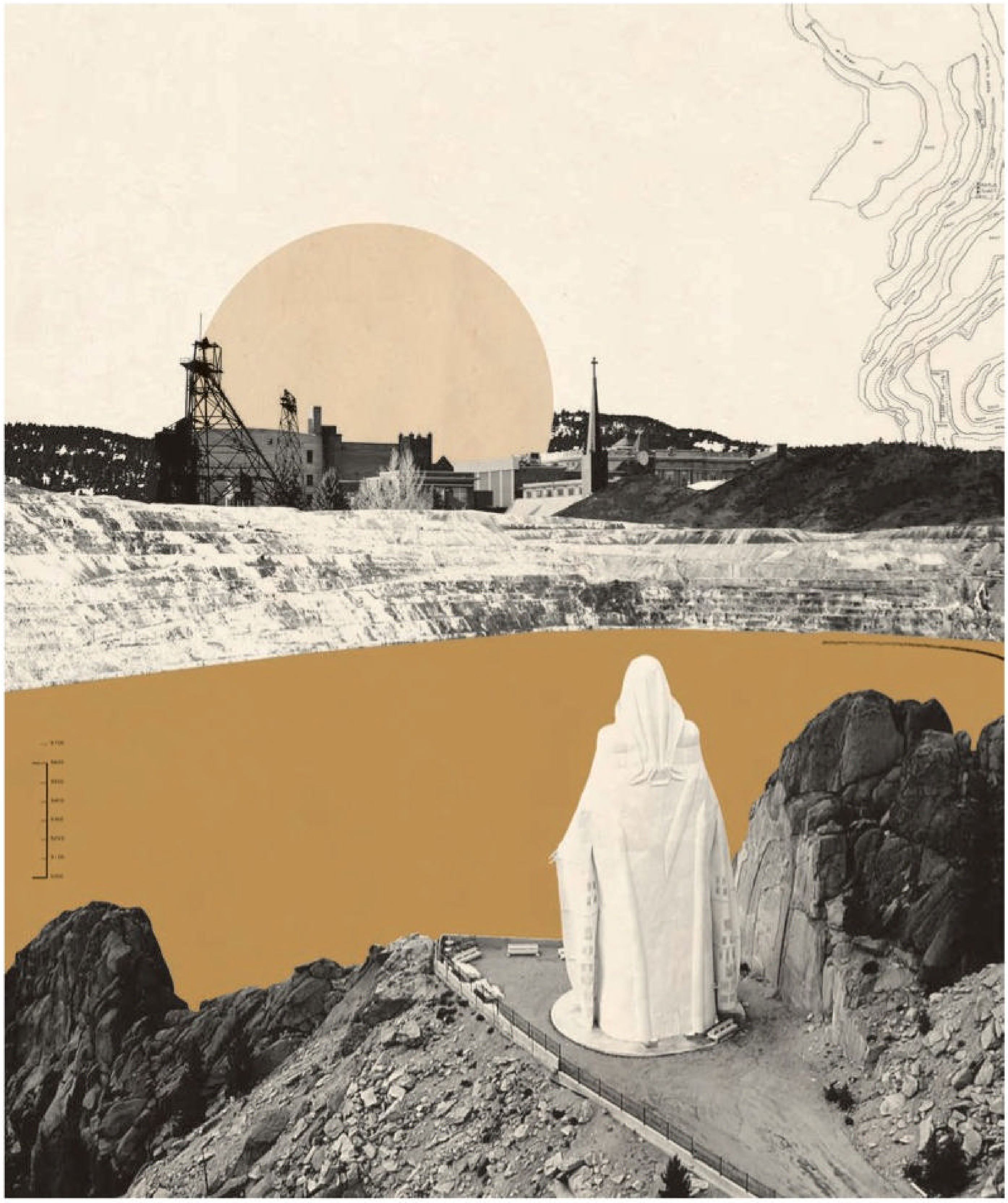
"Giving birth to a son who's going to die for the sins of humanity — there's no greater sacrifice," Kevane said. "It's a model that women sometimes want to live up to. They want to be that sacrificing woman like the Virgin."

Some scholars see Our Lady of the Rockies less as a statue, and more as a shrine. The statue may have arisen from a promise made by O'Bill, but it came to encompass all suffering in Butte.

Axel Samano, who was raised in Colima, Mexico, moved to Butte in 2011 with her husband, who grew up there. In her hometown, pilgrims scale a hill south of the city to a statue of La Virgen that stands atop a dome. "That's why I kind of felt like I'm at home now," she said.

Samano — who runs the IT department for the local library system — told a story similar to Livermore's: that she lived in other places, but only found acceptance of her true self once she arrived in Butte. Three years ago, Samano decided she was ready to take hormones and begin to live as a woman. "Most people assume I'm a genetic woman, which of course, it's an honor," she said. With a few exceptions, she said, people around her in Butte have embraced this change.

At the library, "I used to work there as a



guy," she said. "People there would ask me, 'OK, what do you want me to call you?' And my answer has always been the same. I say, 'You know what? Whatever makes you feel comfortable.' I feel comfortable when somebody calls me 'she' and 'her,' because that's my new identity. But if you don't believe in that, that's your prerogative."

The statue on the mountain contains that spirit of Butte, something Samano called "an act of love and faith from the people."

Last spring, on a freezing day before Easter, Father Patrick Beretta sat inside an office at the spired St. Patrick Catholic Church, in Uptown. A radiator ticked heat into the room.

Beretta, who was born in Paris, moved to Butte a decade ago. Butte's history still affects his parishioners, he said. "You get in touch with your mortality in a hurry when you're in the mine," he explained. "And you get in touch with the people who are around you who can save your life."

So much death created a religiosity extremely specific to Butte. "I've never experienced it quite like this anywhere else in my life," he said. Spirituality in Butte "is a byproduct of connectedness," he added. "Connectedness with people who suffer, because you've lost friends at work, and you've seen them die, and you've been unable to rescue them. … You develop this extraordinary sympathy for those who grieve."

He is clear that there's nothing officially Catholic about Our Lady of the Rockies. Even so, Beretta feels the presence of the statue. As a member of the spiritual care team at the nearby hospital, four blocks from St. Patrick, he often gets late-night calls to come to the bedsides of shooting victims, people who have had heart attacks or been in car accidents, babies born without a heartbeat.

When his work is done, on his way back home, he sees the Lady's light hovering on the ridge. "It's a protective sight for me," he said.

Peggy Falcon, 65, expressed something similar — that the statue feels like a spiritual sentinel. "She watches over us," she said. Up there at her base are plaques for Falcon's mother, two of her sisters, and an aunt. "When I look up there, I know my mom's watching out over me."

The truth, she said, is that Butte needs the Lady and those female spirits. "There was a lot of men that died underground," she said. "Their spirits are lying underground, underneath. Butte's a great town, but there's a lot of negativity, and I think that comes from underground."

Falcon is the president of the Butte Peoples Gathering of Nations Powwow and an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa. "I wasn't born here, but I tell everybody I was bred here," she said with a laugh. "I'm an old Butte girl." Her father was a miner, and she was baptized Catholic, but at a certain point she "shied away from being Catholic, being Christian, because of the way they think," she said. It felt at odds with her Indigenous spirituality.

"We go into the sweat lodge, and we pray and give ourselves," she said. "In warrior times, they smoked peyote to see visions, and they still do that. In Christianity, that's all devil-worshiping. So as soon as they started talking about that, I said, 'Mmm, see ya.' We were here a lot earlier than Christians were, and that's our tradition. I hold to my truth."

Falcon said that there's been a powwow for 46 years in Butte. Two years ago, she finally pushed for a name change — from the North American Indian Alliance Powwow to the Butte Peoples Gathering of Nations. "It was people from Butte that attended," she said. "We gotta include Butte people. I said, 'Let's call it the Butte Peoples.' They're the ones that make this powwow."

Last year, it took place at the Butte Plaza Mall. The Lady watched from the mountain, and Falcon said she knew her mother and sisters were there, seeing her dance.

"Every time we go out of town and go north, you pass her," Falcon said. "We take a little tobacco and sprinkle it on the highway as we're going by. And pray. That's offering her medicine."

MONTANA'S CONSTITUTION is one of a handful of state constitutions that includes a privacy clause, which asserts that the "right of individual privacy is essential to the well-being of a free society and shall not be infringed without the showing of a compelling state interest." According to the state Supreme Court, this clause essentially permits someone to have an abortion, and is "one of the most stringent protections of its citizens' right to privacy in the United States — exceeding even that provided by the federal Constitution."

And so Montana remains an island of bodily autonomy — at least for now. In Idaho and South Dakota, abortion has been criminalized and is potentially punishable by prison time; if enjoinments are lifted in Wyoming and North Dakota, the vast majority of abortions will become illegal in those states, too.

After *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in June, state elected officials voiced their support for the rightward, religiously conservative shift of the Supreme Court. Montana's Republican governor, Greg Gianforte, called the reversal a "historic win for life," and began a push for the state's Supreme Court to revisit the ruling that protected aspects of the privacy clause. In 2021, one state lawmaker even called Montana's Constitution a "socialist rag" that "we need to throw out."

In November 2022, Montana voters elected a Republican supermajority to the Legislature. Former Trump administration Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke bested Monica Tranel, who had rallied people after the overturning of *Roe* from the courthouse steps, winning the race for a new congressional seat in western Montana. Zinke said in debates that "privacy has limits" and that abortion is "barbaric."

> "From my experience, the idea of having this 'live and let live' value is across the state of Montana. But it is really exemplified in Butte. And it's that value specifically that is under attack."

In advance of the 2023 session, Montana legislators pre-filed 28 bill draft requests dealing with abortion.

"It's scary now," Peggy Boyle, a Catholic woman from Butte, said. "I have two granddaughters. And the thought that they would not have a say in what happens with their body? I have a hard time believing Montana has become such a Republican state.

"Most Catholic women would probably say they are pro-life," Boyle said. "I am pro-choice. They say, 'Oh, you can't be pro-choice and Catholic.' And, uh, yeah, ya can. *I* am."

One afternoon last fall, in a meeting room at the Butte-Silver Bow Archives, Ellen Crain, the retired director, told the story of a Butte chiropractor named Gertrude Pitkanen Van Orden — a prime example of what female agency looked like in Butte for women and mothers before *Roe*.

From the late 1920s through the 1950s, Pitkanen performed abortions and sold unwanted babies to hopeful parents. Pitkanen's work as an abortion provider was an "open secret," Crain said. Criminal charges were brought against her three times, but never stuck.

Crain pointed to another room where visitors to the archives can paw through boxes of records, including the death certificates of women who died in Butte from self-induced abortions before Pitkanen began operating. "People will have abortions whether there is *Roe v. Wade* or not," Crain said, her voice lowering. "We know that from hundreds and hundreds of years of documents."

Today, getting an abortion in Butte begins with a drive of at least 90 minutes to the nearest clinic. The Susan Wicklund Fund — a Montana organization that provides funding for people in need of an abortion — said that clients seeking aid drive an average of 200 miles one-way to reach one of the state's six abortion clinics; 90% of counties don't have one. In 2018, the organization received 103 applications for aid; in 2022, it received 321.

Butte-Silver Bow — the official name of the combined city and county government, which consolidated in 1977 — has fewer primary care doctors, a higher incidence of breast cancer and more teen pregnancies per 100,000 people than the rest of the state. Eleven percent of Butte residents lack health insurance.

And the city has only one emergency shelter for women and children experiencing domestic violence. Last year, the shelter, Safe Space — which now has just eight employees — aided 138 clients. "We're fine as long as no one gets sick, takes vacation or takes a day off," Tonya Geraghty, the shelter's interim executive director, said, laughing.

While connecting women with abortion services is not the shelter's primary focus, Geraghty said, the topic comes up. "As someone who has been working in domestic violence and sexual assault for years, I know access to abortion … is crucial to be able to live lives the way they choose."

Women and children land at Safe Space for a number of reasons. There's a shortage of affordable places to live: Montanans have seen the cost of housing jump statewide, and in Butte, the median home price increased from $159,000 in 2020 to almost $300,000 just three years later. There's the statewide fentanyl, methamphetamine and opioid epidemic: In October, Gov. Gianforte declared a crisis in Butte-Silver Bow, which, from 2011 to 2020, had a higher per capita rate of opioid-related deaths than Montana's other populous counties. That crisis can have particularly devastating consequences for women.

"Five years ago, I thought sex trafficking was something that happened to women in other countries," Geraghty said. "There's a lot of addiction in Butte, a lot of poverty, a lot of mental health — (I'm) realizing now, 'Oh wow, OK, someone trading their girlfriend for money for drugs is sex trafficking.' In our little tiny community, this is happening."

Safe Space serves trans people, too. Back in the early 1900s, the moralistic attitude creeping out of Butte's city government extended to gender expression. Throughout the late 1920s, for example, police jailed Jack Moret several times for wearing men's fashions. "She had better appear in women's togs," the police chief growled to newspaper reporters once after Moret was released. "If she is dressed like a man, back here she comes." To those same reporters, Moret pointed out the irony of the situation: Prostitutes in Butte were generally fined $5 to $10; Moret was initially fined $50. To be an immoral woman was against the law, but to betray one's gender was five times as bad.

"They probably didn't want this woman dressing as a man because they did not want women in men's spaces," said Shawn Reagor, the director of equality and economic justice who works on LGBTQ rights for the Montana Human Rights Network. "Just like (then)," he said, today "extremists want to turn Montana into a white, straight ethnostate — majority Christian."

Reagor referenced a slate of anti-LGBTQ bill proposals for the 2023 legislative session: an amendment "defining gender" in the state, a bill to "codify definitions of male and female," a bill to prohibit minors from attending drag shows. In 2021, Rep. John Fuller successfully sponsored a bill banning transgender girls from competing on women's sports teams, which Gianforte signed into law. (It was declared unconstitutional by a district court last fall.)

"It's a slate of hate from extremists that doesn't represent our Montana values, and we won't stand by and allow it to become the law of the land," Reagor said. "When you add them together to really see the harm they are attempting to do and the attack on the LGBTQ community members, it is deeply concerning."

"From my experience, the idea of having this 'live and let live' value is across the state of Montana," he said. "But it is really exemplified in Butte. And it's that value specifically that is under attack."

UNTIL THE WEATHER got too cold in November, every Thursday afternoon after *Roe* was overturned, pro-choice demonstrators gathered outside the county courthouse in Butte, organized by Joan Stennick, a 67-year-old artist with long light hair and straight bangs.

After the Supreme Court's decision was announced, Stennick was drawn to the courthouse steps for the rally where Tranel spoke. "I looked around at another woman, and our eyes met," Stennick said. "I said, 'I wanna keep coming back here every Thursday, on these same courthouse steps, so the women of Butte can have a protest.'"

The *Standard* reported some 200 people at early protests. It seemed like Butte's tradition of organizing in the streets was still alive. But by the fall, enthusiasm had waned. "Now I'm hearing, 'Well, I'm just going to stay home and write letters,'" Stennick said.

"I mean, you don't just sit back and write letters," she said. "Our rights, our human rights, our civil rights have always been won in the street. The suffragettes, they were chaining themselves to light posts."

Stennick said that the difference between Butte's protests then and now is that those of the past were about men's labor, while this fight is about women's rights. "Women's rights are going to have to come first," she said. "If you just go with labor (rights) then it's just more of the same thing. It's more of a patriarchal system."

On a clear afternoon in late September, Stennick arrived in front of the courthouse with a pile of handmade signs reading "HONK FOR CHOICE" under one arm. "People really like to honk their horns," she said. "Wouldn't it be a beautiful thing if all through the Uptown area, for an hour, you just heard horns honking?"

Waiting at the corner of Montana and Granite Streets, sitting in a faded rust-colored folding chair, was Stennick's most reliable co-protester: George Waring, an 83-year-old retired professor from nearby Montana Tech. He hadn't missed a single Thursday demonstration. Stennick handed him a sign that read "Abort the Court" and walked down the street to gather honks a few blocks away.

"The first public speech I ever gave was right from the courthouse," Waring said, waving at cars and holding his sign from his chair. It was an anti-Vietnam War protest. He was more upbeat about the current cause: "We're gonna win this one."

Passing drivers responded to his sign with short beeps and long enthusiastic honks. Down the street, Stennick's sign was proving effective, too, and for a time, Uptown Butte transformed into a chorus: horns bleating and echoing off the brick building sides, hoots and whistles coming from car windows. Only once did a truck rev. "Fuck off!" the driver yelled at Waring. "Go to fucking hell!"

"He's the first one today," Waring chuckled, and kept waving.

Despite the audible support, it was a lonely protest, and a painful contrast to Butte's proud history of demanding power for the common worker. Maybe after so much struggle, the city was just tired. Or maybe rallying in the streets for working people really was the past, and a steel statue on the mountainside would prove to be the most it could muster for working women, for women's bodies, for women's choices.

Over the last century, as Butte has reveled in its gritty past, Montana was changing all around it. It became wealthier, more conservative. Montana's future is now in the hands of elected officials who intend to make the present, and the future, look more like Butte from the early 1900s: anti-woman, anti-trans, anti-worker.

Whatever stories Butte will tell about this moment, it seems to face a choice: to continue to define itself by its mythology, or to swing its fists once again — this time fighting for all the people whose voices have never really been heard.

"We were only cussed out by one driver," Waring reported to Stennick when she came back to collect his sign at the corner of Montana and Granite.

Stennick's face lit up, and she grabbed Waring by the shoulders. "Well, that's not bad!"

The two agreed to meet up next week at the same time, on the same street corner: a pair of rebel hearts who still believe in all the things Butte says it is.

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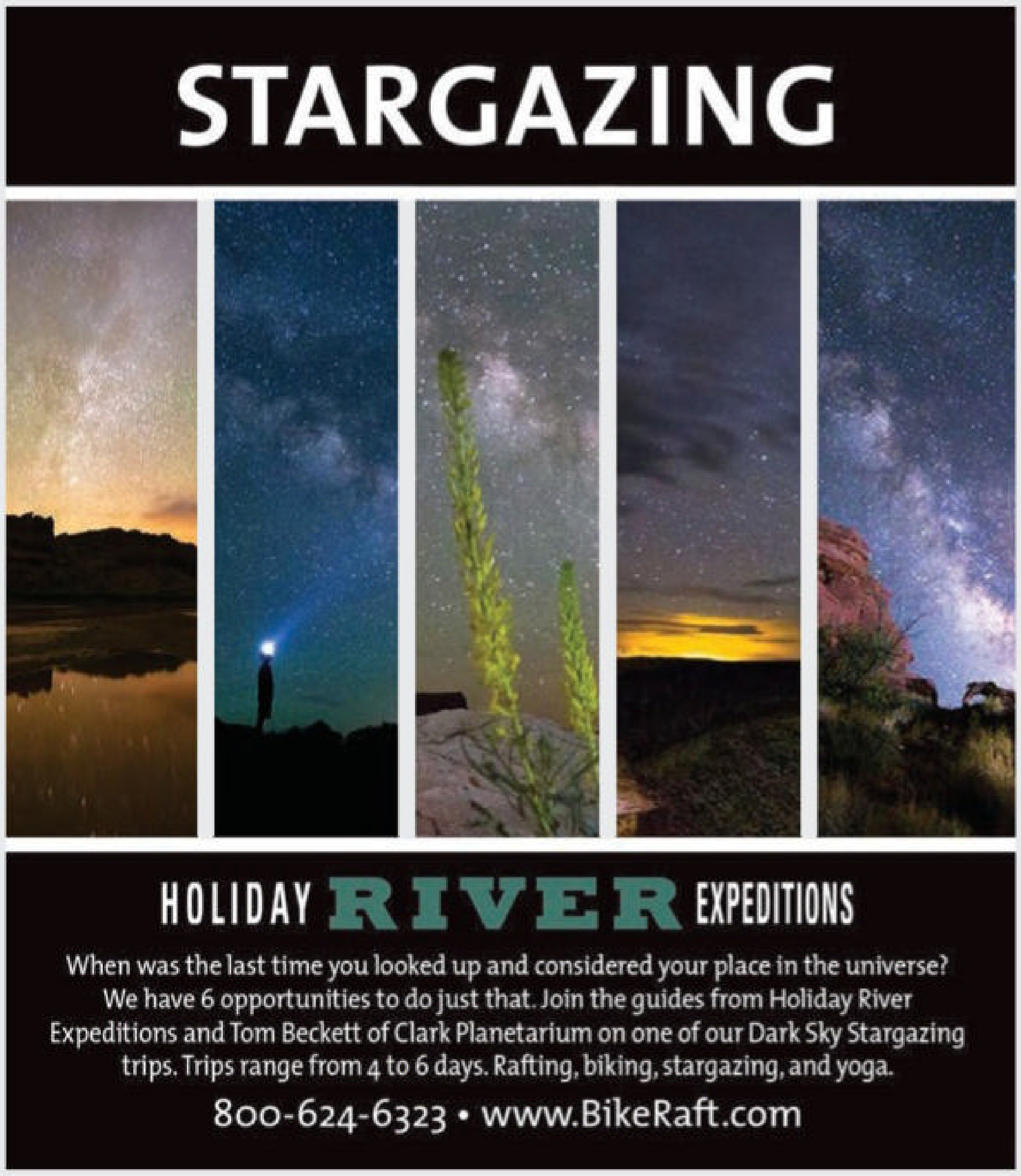
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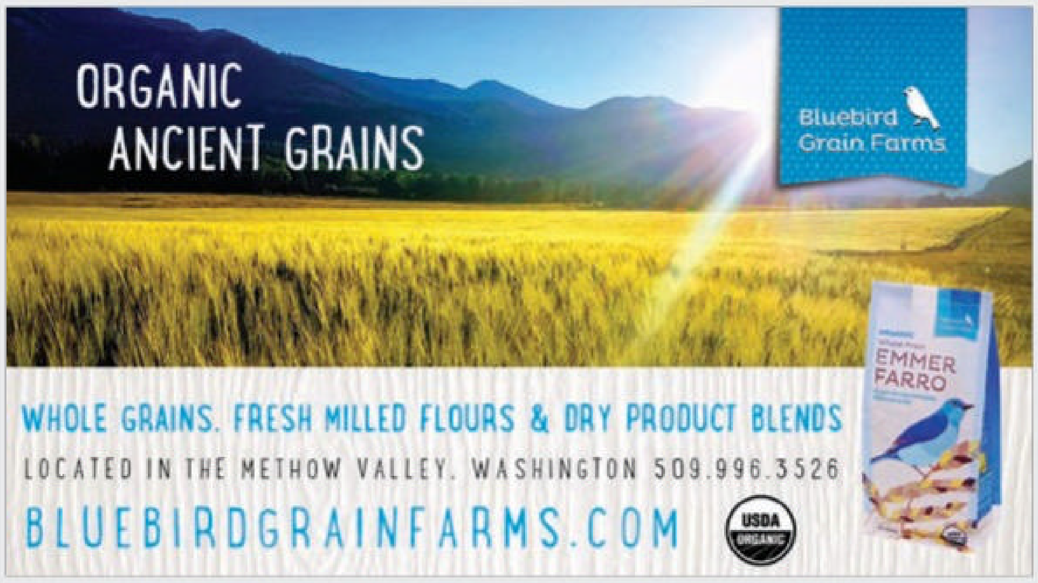
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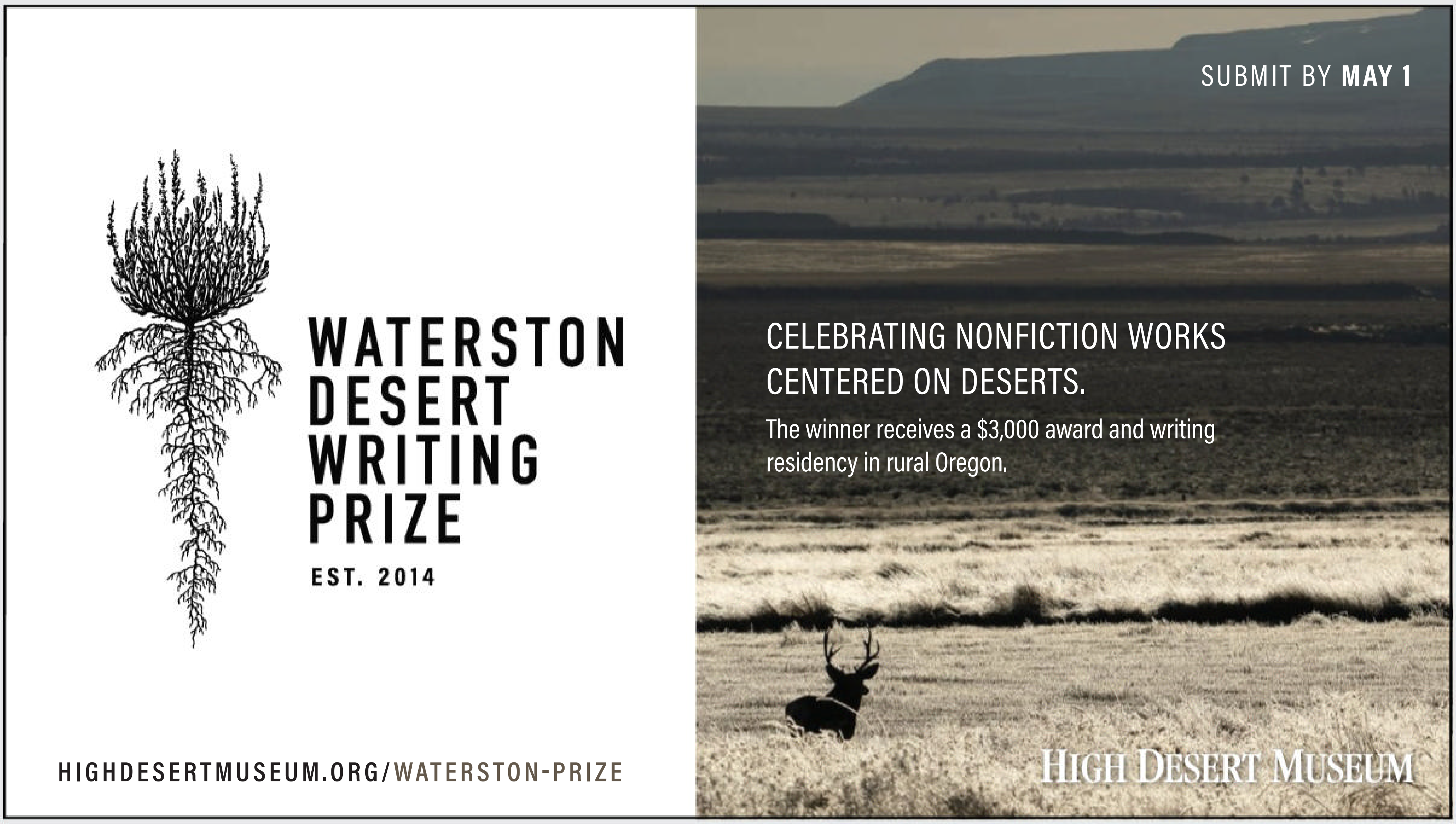
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PERSPECTIVE

Power outages are a life-and-death issue

Utilities should take action to protect people with disabilities.

BY ALICE WONG

THE TERMS "ATMOSPHERIC RIVER" and "bomb cyclone" were not in my vocabulary until recently. During the first two weeks of 2023, however, the San Francisco Bay Area was deluged with a series of storms. I am a disabled person who depends on power to live: When I came home after four weeks in the ICU last summer, I was tethered to a feeding machine that pumps food into my stomach, as well as to a ventilator that's attached to a hole in my throat, among numerous other devices. The stakes for potential harm during a power outage have exponentially increased. My anxiety, vulnerability and fear are real.

JAN. 3, 2023, 10:44 p.m.: Texted my caregivers on what to do if a power outage happens while I am in bed tomorrow night. Air mattress will deflate, and I will immediately need to be transferred into my wheelchair. I will need to use my backup electric batteries for medical devices such as my suction machine, since I need to suction hourly every day.

JAN. 4, 10 a.m.: Mentally calculating how much battery life some of my machines need before needing to use my backup electric battery. My other devices do not have a built-in battery.

1:30 p.m.: Asked my father to make sure my backup electric batteries are fully charged.

2 p.m.: Let my morning caregiver leave her shift early so that she can get home safely before the brunt of the storm arrives. Did not hydrate today, because my nighttime caregiver will not arrive until 9 p.m. Worried for

Disabled and older people continue to die from ignorance and inattention — and the state is complicit in their deaths.

her, and worried for me. I hope I don't get a full bladder.

3:02 p.m.: Tweeting information about the storm. Noticing that many weather-related tweets do not have alt text in graphics and captions in videos that contain vital information about the storm, evacuations and road closures.

3:30 p.m.: Watching the news and scrolling Twitter. My father, who thinks I'm being an alarmist, said, "The news always exaggerates the dangers." After living with me for decades, he still doesn't understand.

6:01 p.m.: Preemptively charging some of my devices, topping them up with power tonight, just in case.

6:19 p.m.: *Uh-oh.* My bladder feels a little full. Let's see if I can hold on until 9-ish when my caregiver arrives. I hope she makes it.

7:57 p.m.: Caregiver texted me saying she won't be able to arrive until 10:30 due to a delay from her other job. Bladder, don't fail me now! Can't wait to be catheterized.

10:18 p.m.: Praise be, my caregiver arrived! Time to pee. Sweet relief!

Whether they are caused by wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding or storms, power outages are a life-and-death issue for many of us. Time and time again, disabled and older people are left behind or not prioritized in emergency planning. When a brutal winter storm hit Buffalo, New York, this past December, the mother of a 1-year-old had to manually ventilate her child due to a power outage. Nineteen patients at a nursing facility in Castro Valley, California, had to be rescued from flooding on Dec. 31, when the first atmospheric river hit the Bay Area. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle,* "Two people could not communicate and were unable to leave their wheelchairs, so deputies and paramedics ripped seats out of a van to transport them. … Crews had to cut the building's power before mopping up, which would have meant shutting off medical devices and putting the seniors at risk." Where is the infrastructure and planning that will ensure that paramedics won't have to rip the seats out of a van just to make it accessible? At a minimum, city agencies and first responders should have access to wheelchair-accessible vehicles for evacuation and rescue efforts.

Like everyone else in California, I am bombarded by information about staying safe during power outages. Much of the advice, however, is not feasible or even possible for poor, disabled and older people to follow. People cannot stock up on medications if they are uninsured or underinsured. And recommended mitigation efforts — such as unplugging all appliances during an outage and purchasing equipment like generators — are financially or physically impossible for many of us.

Systemic problems with emergency preparedness are not new. Federal, state and local authorities continue to fail disabled and older people. In the event of emergencies or natural disasters, disabled people have been hospitalized or institutionalized due to a lack of accessible shelters, accommodations and housing.

A 2019 report from the National Council on Disability (NCD) put it bluntly: "As a result of unnecessary institutionalizations during and after disasters, people with disabilities often go unaccounted for, families are separated from loved ones, working individuals with disabilities often become unemployed, and students with disabilities are often excluded from returning to school with their peers."

Likewise, a 2021 statement by the NCD notes that "history has repeatedly shown that people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs in emergencies are frequently overlooked or have their needs minimized." Disabled and older people continue to die from ignorance and inattention — and the state is complicit in their deaths.

Those who harp on the importance of individual personal responsibility during times of crisis are overlooking the deeper structural barriers that keep disabled and older people especially vulnerable to natural disasters and emergencies. It's true that utility providers in California have some programs designed to help those most impacted by power shutoffs. But I often think of my late friend, Stacey Park Milbern, a dedicated community organizer with #PowerToLive, a grassroots campaign to expose PG&E's inadequate response to disabled customers during wildfire-related power shutoffs in 2019. In an interview with KQED, she said, "A lot of activism work is trying to shift people to think about interdependence rather than independence. I believe if you view the needs of the most marginalized people impacted by an issue, then ultimately the entire community benefits."

Hopes and prayers are not enough. Checking on your neighbors and families is not enough. Federal legislation such as the REAADI for Disasters Act is not enough, since passing a law will not immediately render aid to the people who need it the most. Companies in California and nationwide need to be proactive: Hire teams of disabled people to make policy, programmatic and structural improvements within their companies; recruit and retain disabled employees for leadership positions in accessibility, infrastructure, customer relations, communications and community outreach; and make battery and generator rebate programs available to any customer regardless of income. Utility companies can well afford these and other necessary changes; they make billions in profits every year. PG&E's gross annual profit was $16.942 billion, with revenue of $21.556 billion, for the 12 months ending on Sept. 30, 2022.

I honestly do not know what I will do if a multi-day power outage happens in my area. I worry for myself, and I worry for all of us. Community care, structural changes, and centering leadership by those most impacted will help provide the way forward to a future where no one will ever be left behind.

Etchings on the landscape

Yosemite is marked by histories both political and personal.

BY RYANE NICOLE GRANADOS | ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIELLA TRUJILLO

THE LINES ETCHED on my wedding band resemble mountain peaks or ocean waves, depending on what you imagine them to be. I've always preferred the beach to the mountains. Some studies suggest that the beach is for extroverts, who favor frolicking and socializing over a solitary mountain journey. I am more extroverted than my mountain-loving husband, but I think my love of the beach has more to do with its sweeps of sand, colored sea glass and the sound of the ocean, emanating ease and serenity. The mountains have always left me with a tinge of fear. The threatening forests featured in horror movies, combined with my ancestral memory of Blacks being murdered in rural places, meant that the mountains, until recently, rarely called my name.

Our annual trip to Yosemite National Park became a tradition well before my husband and I exchanged our engraved rings. He was a teenaged Midwesterner, newly transplanted to California, when he went on a last-minute summer backpacking trek near Glacier Point and decided that he would bring his future family to this idyllic place. "It's the sky," he said. "There's too much light pollution in the city. You have never seen the sky like this." And he was right. A Yosemite sunset looks like a three-tiered cake, a frosted portrait of purple, yellow and orange watercolor coursing into the trees.

Now, many years and many kids later, we load up car seats and snacks and probably more winter clothes than we need — the Angeleno in me must prepare fervently for anything below 60 degrees — and make our way to Evergreen Lodge.

Ten years in, the six-hour drive is easier now. We're fortified with a playlist and motion sickness medicine. There's familiarity around every bend. We know we're close to the park when we see the Wawona General Store and Post Office, distinguished by its old but working phone booth. We stop at Rush Creek River, and the kids pile out of the car to stretch their legs and change from sneakers to snowboots. Cell reception fades, and I grade a last essay or send a final email before rolling down the window, drawing mountain air deep into my lungs.

The entrance to Yosemite is dramatized by a brightly lit tunnel that opens into a view of the entire valley. Granite monoliths from El Capitan to Half Dome overshadow the basin, and the incredible landscape is simultaneously romantic and isolating. It draws you near, but also reminds you how small and insignificant we are amid these grand creations. The isolation deepens as I people-watch, realizing that from this moment forward my own image in the car mirror will likely be the only other Black woman I see. But my children are a reflection of me. Instinctively, I begin counting heads and corralling brown faces back into our truck.

In years past, we've stopped at Yosemite Valley Chapel, Yosemite Falls and the Ahwahnee Hotel. The hotel reminds me of the movie *The Shining*, but it's not as alarming as the Wawona Hotel, whose white plaster columns more closely resemble a plantation's. I whisper all of this to my husband because, to the kids, this is just a fun trip to the snow.

A winter getaway isn't meant to be a political statement, yet I exist in a political body. Our Black, Mexican, Norwegian, German and Caribbean family is loudly politicized whether I whisper or scream. So, we scream: Near Crane Flat, we pull to the side of the road, get out, and scream.

Our screams echo back to us, bouncing off the trees like waves approaching a marina. Our 8-year-old calls out for Bigfoot. Our teenage son's deepened voice booms through the thickets. I would never permit myself to scream in the city; I would never consider screaming at the beach. The sense of vulnerability I feel in the middle of the Stanislaus Forest can't be denied, and my freedom to scream is how I harness my release.

The lodge where we stay is on the other side of the forest, so we follow the Merced River through the valley to the cabin that is our home for five days each December. It looks like a gingerbread house, coated with snow. The only other Black women I've seen here were the friends I've brought with me over the years, but the road signs, the entrances and exits through the wooded terrain, all exemplify access. Our family trip to Yosemite has given me access to places I subconsciously felt weren't home to me. And when people marvel at the old-timey pictures on the lodge walls, I commemorate the historic images that exist outside the frames: The Buffalo Soldiers, children of enslaved people, who protected Yosemite as its first-ever park rangers. Years later, the Black families who drove through the ravine during the Great Migration of the 1920s. They existed here. I exist here, and over 4,000 years ago, the Ahwahnechee people of Ahwahnee Valley existed here.

For me, a journey through Yosemite is not a celebration of stolen land, it is a remembrance. A remembrance of the original caretakers of this land, including the Ahwahnechee elders who have recently worked to resurrect Wahhoga village, the last Indigenous village in Yosemite, which had been destroyed by 1969. A remembrance of the young, the old, the teenagers climbling mountains bigger than they dreamed, the etchings on my wedding ring, and my once-pregnant belly.

It's also a demonstration of Black bodies in nature and a 44-year-old me storing up evergreen energy to take back to the city. For a few days each year, you can find me in the wilderness. And if you drive through Yosemite in mid-December, you might hear my unbridled scream reverberating through the sequoias.

TOWNSHIP AND RANGE

Exploring the intersection of race and family in the interior rural West.

Say rabbit

Living on luck in pronghorn country.

BY NINA MCCONIGLEY
ILLUSTRATION BY TARA ANAND

“CANTALOUPE!”

My daughter points across the prairie at the buff-colored animals in the sagebrush and sedges.

“Antelope,” I correct her.

“Cantaloupe,” she says solemnly.

Technically, we’re both wrong: They are pronghorns — “speedgoats,” as my husband calls them. It’s late summer, and spindly-legged baby pronghorns graze next to their mothers. They are learning the land, and I imagine they, too, are being corrected. Our dog, a spaniel mix, every so often peels forward at top speed, chasing after a jackrabbit that is almost as big as he is. The flash of the rabbit’s white rump and the futile chase make my daughter shout with glee. I call him back, leashing him and telling him to stop harassing the wildlife. Both rabbits and antelope cross the prairie with ease, their movements meteoric across the land.

Since I was a little girl, on the first day of every month, the first words out of my mouth have been “rabbit rabbit.” It’s a bit of folk wisdom my uncle taught me for luck. There are variations of it; some people say white rabbits. Others believe that “hare hare” are the last words you should say before you sleep.

As a teenager, I taped a piece of paper by my waterbed that reminded me to “SAY RABBIT.” Now, on the last day of the month, I make my Facebook status “Rabbit, Rabbit” before I go to bed, since my phone is usually the first thing I look at in the morning.

But the first words out of my mouth changed once I had children. “Go back to sleep.” “Mama’s here.” “You’re safe.” “There are no monsters.” All soothing words, imploring sleep. I look out the window at the moon and the constellations glowing in the sky, and I hold my children, rocking them. Sometimes I tell them stories — Peter Rabbit, the three little pigs, Goldilocks and the bears. Stories about trickster animals maneuvering through the world, relying on their wits and a little grace.

I tell my children that animals are lucky, that some people carry a rabbit’s foot to keep them safe.

A few years ago, I drew an antelope tag. Some people say that hunting in Wyoming is about luck — that it depends on the tag you draw, the terrain, the weather on opening day.

When I was a teenager growing up in Casper, Wyoming, archery replaced girls’ PE for a quarter in middle school; in ninth grade, hunter safety was taught. I was not an athlete. Skinny and uncoordinated, I was relieved to get out of scooter soccer and dodgeball. I’d never before held a weapon, and for weeks, in a dank underground gym, I nocked arrows and learned what was my dominant eye. Later, we shot pellet guns, then cleared the range, picking up discarded pellets. I turned my targets in for grades, and I learned about conservation, wildlife identification and outdoor safety. I told my Indian mother about hypothermia; she already hated the cold and kept our house at a tropical temperature to counter the wind of the High Plains.

When it came time to learn how to field-dress an animal, we studied charts, since it wasn’t hunting season. But then a ranch girl brought in a stillborn lamb. Years later I can still see us, a group of teenage girls, around that lamb, looking at its insides, cutting its skin with a knife, inspecting connective tissue and removing organs.

I had not held a hunting knife or gun since school. But a few years ago, I decided to try to grow or hunt as much of my own food as possible. I have always had a small garden. But at 7,200 feet, the growing season is short, and I could not live off my kale and scraggly tomatoes. So I went for an antelope tag, which was easier to draw then an elk or deer.

I didn’t own a gun, so a family friend, an experienced hunter, lent me one and helped me get ready for my first hunt. For several weekends, we went to a rifle range so I could practice. The sound of the gun startled me, and I worked to steady my aim. It was August, just before the 15th anniversary of 9/11 and a few weeks before opening day. Next to me a group of men were shooting at a paper target — the silhouette of a man, clearly foreign. The target looked like the uncle who taught me to say *rabbit rabbit*. I felt my skin.

A few days after opening day, dressed in orange, we headed across the Shirley Basin near Medicine Bow, Wyoming. It was a long day — we started in the dark — and late in the morning, I caught my first clear glimpse of an antelope. I don’t mind the sagey taste of their meat, and I love a good backstrap. I sighted a small buck and prepared to pull the trigger. But just as I did so, the two of us made eye contact. I could not kill him.

I USED TO TELL people I felt like my family were pioneers, a new kind. We traveled to Wyoming with suitcases, like trunks in a wagon, unsure of a new land. But over time, I’ve come to see the word “pioneer” differently. It feels heavier. It reminds me of those paper targets of silhouettes: It’s not the full picture, and it’s problematic. Pioneers were not the first to settle the West. There were plenty of Indigenous communities already thriving.

Now it’s the journeys of animals I am drawn to — to pronghorn antelope and rabbits. Antelope habitat is slowly being cut up. When a fence crosses a migration route, the animals are effectively stopped. Their movements are impeded all the time by roads, by developments, by us. Antelope have delicate leg bones, and it’s not in their nature to jump. It’s in their nature to run.

Rabbits, however, do not migrate; they use the same land year-round – making one place work in all kinds of conditions.

The Lunar New Year began in January: 2023 is the Year of the Rabbit. My zodiac sign is the rabbit. When I was 16, my first job was at a Chinese restaurant. I spent a year setting freshly wiped tables with paper placemats that explained the Chinese zodiac. People born during the Year of the Rabbit are said to be articulate and affectionate but shy — peace-seeking throughout our lives. At 16, I did not want a peaceful life. I wanted passion and noise. I wanted out of Wyoming.

“There are no monsters,” I tell my daughters. Even though there are fences. Even though there are men shooting at shadows.

In the silence of the dark, still living here in the West, I hold my daughters close, stroke their little legs, and whisper to them that they are safe. The dog twitches his foot in dreams at the end of the bed.

Long after they are asleep, I repeat again and again, “Rabbit rabbit.” It’s not the first day of the month. But I say it anyway. I will do anything to better their chances in life. I will do anything to help them run, and if need be, jump.

Heard Around the West

Tips about Western oddities are appreciated and often shared in this column. Write heard@hcn.org.

BY TIFFANY MIDGE | ILLUSTRATION BY ARMANDO VEVE

CALIFORNIA

Here’s a whale of a tale — with a happy ending — from Dana Point Harbor, California. A gray whale gave birth astonishingly close to Capt. Dave’s Dolphin and Whale Watching Safari’s catamaran sailboat. The whale had been “acting strangely” and “swimming in circles” when Capt. Dave’s staff noticed the blood. “Normally, when you see blood in the water, it’s not a good sign,” said Stacie Fox, who has worked for the marine tour company for three years. When Fox realized the cow was giving birth, she quickly alerted the captain. It was a momentous occurrence, one for the sightseers’ bucket list. “It is kinda hard to put into words how amazing it was,” Fox told the *Los Angeles Times*. The staff said the birth was the “first live viewing in the 25 years they have been watching whales.” Normally, the whales give birth in the lagoons in Baja California, Mexico, at the end of their yearly migration from the Arctic waters.

If you’re wondering about the scale of our marine mammal brethren, the Oceanic Society reports that gray whales reach 40-50 feet in length and can weigh more than 70,000 pounds. The babies aren’t exactly teeny either, popping out at about 2,000 pounds and already 14 to 16 feet in length. They’re mighty cute, though, according to Fox, who said the whale calf looked like a “little pickle.” Probably not a gherkin.

IDAHO

The long-running CBS reality show *Survivor* held some surprises for its 43rd season: Mike Gabler, a heart valve specialist from Meridian, Idaho, was not only the second-oldest winner in the show’s history — he was 51 during the filming — he also pledged his million-dollar winnings to charity. Gabler plans to donate the entire prize to the Veterans in Need Foundation in the name of his father, Robert Gabler, a Green Beret, the *Idaho Statesman* reported. “There are people that need that money more,” Gabler told *Survivor* host Jeff Probst, citing the suicide epidemic and veterans suffering from psychiatric problems and PTSD. It seems fitting that someone who specializes in life-saving heart valves would be in possession of such an enormous heart himself.

CALIFORNIA

If you happened to be watching the news on Jan. 20 and saw bright pink waves at Torrey Pines State Beach in San Diego, there was no need to adjust your TV, or your brain: You had not been accidentally dosed; the surf was. Scientists from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography poured 15 gallons of nontoxic pink dye into the Los Peñasquitos Lagoon in order to figure out how the saltwater surf zone interacts with freshwater. That hot pink fluorescent dye did make for some pretty psychedelic photos, and it will also provide scientists with some useful information, NBC San Diego reported. Scripps said it will help researchers understand the spread of “sediment, pollutants, larvae, harmful algal blooms and other important material near the coast.” We love it when science gets its groove on.

WASHINGTON

Living in a “surveillance state” a la *1984* definitely has its downsides. But at least when remarkable celestial events occur, you can bet dollars to donuts that everybody and their Auntie Tootie is going to upload videos of it. A bright green “fireball” — basically a meteor on steroids — was seen streaking across skies in western Washington on Jan. 17. According to the American Meteor Society, “A fireball is another term for a very bright meteor, generally brighter than magnitude-4, which is about the same magnitude of the planet Venus as seen in the morning or evening sky.” The technical term for this is “Amazeballs!” as the videos clearly attest; Kiro7.com included several in its report. The American Meteor Society urges anyone who sees a fireball to report it to them, noting the object’s brightness, its color, and the length and duration of its journey across the sky.

CALIFORNIA

Speaking of celestial events, astronaut Nicole Mann, Wailacki of the Round Valley Indian Tribes, made history as the first Indigenous woman to walk in space. (Mann is the second Native astronaut in space; John Herrington, Chickasaw, was the first, 20 years ago.) Mann has been living in the International Space Station with other crew members of Expedition 68 since Oct. 6, 2022.. *Indian Country Today* shared Mann’s message for children in her community: “Please know that I carry your hopes and your dreams with me to the International Space Station.”

How to get government records and what to do with them

Learn about the role public records play in *High Country News'* reporting and inspiring change across the West — and how you can play a part!

Live Virtual Event

How to Use Open Records Laws

Wednesday, March 15
11:30 a.m. PT / 12:30 p.m. MT
Register at hcn.org/sunshine-week

Access to public records is key to the investigative reporting *High Country News* and other news outlets produce. Yet individuals are more prolific users of tools like the federal Freedom of Information Act than news organizations. At *HCN,* we know firsthand how dogged our readers can be in accessing public information: You often send us records you've obtained or tip us off to what we should be asking for and where to find it.

In honor of Sunshine Week, an annual initiative to promote open government, we're hosting a live virtual event about the power of open records laws and how you can join other *HCN* readers and engaged citizens everywhere in using these important tools to hold government bodies and agencies to account.

host

Kate Schimel, news and investigations editor at *High Country News.*

In her role overseeing *HCN's* investigations and major accountability projects, Schimel works with reporters to access public records often key to understanding critical issues unfolding in the West.

guests

Kelly Nokes, staff attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center.

In her work for WELC, an organization working to protect public lands and wildlife in the Western U.S., Nokes is involved in litigation related to Freedom of Information Act requests and compelling government agencies to produce records in a timely fashion.

Phil Neff, project coordinator for the University of Washington Center for Human Rights.

The UW Center for Human Rights' Access to Information project uses the Freedom of Information Act and state public records laws to investigate local and international human rights issues, with Neff coordinating those efforts.

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Luke Swenson / HCN

#IAM THE WEST

ROBERT ANTHONY VILLA
Naturalist and outreach specialist with
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Tucson, Arizona

As a young child growing up in Tucson, I fell in love with the desert. I've always been a fan of getting people to empathize with a landscape and with beings which are not human. That comes from working with Indigenous communities and personal life experience. This desert is in some ways very harsh and unforgiving, but the adaptations that plants and other animals have developed to survive this place are very specific. There's a perception that these plants and animals are tough and resilient — and therefore immune to the threats of climate change, human expansion and extraction of resources. But they are only resilient within specific thresholds, and they can hardly keep up with the unprecedented extremes we continue to experience on our planet, year to year.

Do you know a Westerner with a great story?
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